

Solo Ringing
Developing speed, grace, and musicality

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Equipment Matters

Tables: Height should be comfortable. If it's too low, you could develop back and wrist problems. Solutions: 1. Add a layer of foam – negative is that the thicker the foam, the more resonance is lost when using mallets, marts, plucks. 2. Add table leg extenders. If the table is too high, you'll lose speed and agility while trying to ring fast and smooth.

I prefer an eight-foot table (can't get all the bells on 6 feet) in one piece. Putting tables together increases the probability that edges won't meet, causing bells to roll.

Foam pads: Best pads are 3" thick, firm foam, not permanently covered. WHY? Again, the resonance is ruined by soft foam, by even 1" thicker foam, and especially by covering the pads with any fabric, then laying a decorative cover on top. Another pitfall with permanently covered pads is valleys that bells can roll into between pads, and bells rolling over more easily on a taut surface. Tight covers over individual pads round the edges of pads, which make a smooth, continuous surface impossible to achieve, and bells will roll into the cracks.

Cover: Traditionally, pinwale corduroy is the fabric of choice. It enhances resonance, helps prevent bells from rolling, and helps in damping bells. If you make your table cover in 2 pieces, attaching the front/sides to the top by Velcro, it doesn't matter what other fabric you use. Several skirts could be in reserve for different seasons or occasions.

Handbells: No matter which brand you prefer, make sure the bells are in top condition, properly adjusted to ring easily on the strike point, less easily on the back. If you have trouble with very small bells falling through handles in a bell tree, damping each other, try replacing the hand guard with a larger one. I use B5 hand guards on all my tree bells from F6 and higher.

Gloves: This is a matter of personal preference. I wear gloves because 1. I use a lot of techniques where fingers touch the bronze and I don't like polishing bells, but do like them shiny. 2. Bare hands stick to the handles and slow me down. My gloves fit snugly and have a smooth surface.

Layout

This works for me...I consider C5-C7 my "instrument", with every bell in that range placed on the table, whether I use it or not. It's important to maintain a consistent, dependable visual field. Do you remove keys from any instrument when you don't use them in a song? It will increase your ability to ring technically and musically to get used to the sight and feel of this keyboard. I space my natural notes close together in a row near the edge of the table. Then I lay out the sharps and flats in a second row, as in a piano keyboard, except the handles do not lie between the row one castings – they are completely above them. Until you are comfortable with pre-setting bells out of keyboard order, or laying them down temporarily in another place for easier reach, it's very important to maintain keyboard order during a solo. Put a bell down exactly where you picked it up from, not letting bells migrate. The spaces between Eb/F#, Bb/C# are great places to temporarily lay a bell for easier reach, forming row 2 1/2. When I use a bass bell, I turn it at an angle to the left of C5. For bells higher than C7, you may choose to lay out only the ones used in a solo, in any convenient order. After you are thoroughly familiar with your keyboard, then you can start moving bells around for faster moves, more efficient reaches, and the use of traveling or other 2-in-hand techniques.

Basic skills

Learn how to achieve legato motion, gluing every note to the next, without crossing hands, passing a bell from one hand to the other excessively, and messing up the keyboard.

"Economy of motion, every motion has meaning." Use all the time and space allowed by a note value to keep the bell in motion, ending up in the airspace where you will damp or lay down a bell. Choreograph every move, letting your hands flow smoothly from one bell to the next without hesitation, flowing along in rhythm with the music, and passing bells within the pulse of the beat.

Specialized skills

Weave

Cross over/under

Which hand “leads”? 3 bells in ascending order, start with rh on lower bell; 3 bells in descending order, start with lh on highest bell. 4 in a row ? Generally, start with the normal hand on the normal bell and weave.

Finger damping, body damping other than shoulder or table damping

Multiple bells in hand: shelley, 2-in-hand (separate and interlocked handles), traveling 2-in-hand, 3-in-hand, bell trees

Rearrange keyboard for smoothness.

Damp a bell in the space temporarily vacated by a bell that's off the table for speed.

Singing Bell

Rehearsal techniques

Longer is not necessarily better. I find shorter rehearsal times, more often, are a more effective way to practice. Everyone learns differently, but what works for me – I learn a song by singing note names, singing the beats in a measure, learning one section at a time. There's no substitute for repetition. It is a truism that the more your practice, the better you will become, and the more confident you'll be in performance. I do a lot of mental rehearsing away from the bell table. Video or audio taping a rehearsal is a great learning tool, especially the closer you get to performance readiness. A tape listened to with eyes closed will reveal breaks between notes, the lack of phrasing and dynamic contrast, uneven rhythms, and other flaws you might not notice otherwise. A video will reveal the visual aspect, and is important to let you know what people will notice about your performance. “People hear what they see” ...Are your motions flowing or jerky? Do you look unsure, worried, or does your face and whole attitude calmly reflect the piece you're ringing? I like to imagine someone is sitting in the corner of my bell room, critiquing my ringing, and what would he say about it? I also like to visualize the concert hall and audience, pretending I'm there and performing my level best. Practicing often not only increases your skill and confidence levels, but

also gives you the ability to recover quickly from any mistakes in performance.

Memorization tricks

It is my firm belief that unless a piece is memorized, the performer is only playing notes, not making music. Memorization frees your eyes and mind from the printed notes, allowing you to interpret the music, ring expressively, and communicate to your audience the meaning of your song. You can ring from the heart, not the page. It allows you to turn a negative (picked up the wrong bell) into a positive (use it as a passing tone) instead of becoming panic-stricken and paralyzed. Repetition, mental practice, practicing with “air bells”, tapes, ringing without music before you think you’re ready...all these things help.

Developing Lightning Speed

Can-opener stroke: ring the bell extremely close to table level with a downward snap of the wrist, as though you’re opening a can of juice.

Keep bells very close to table, and don’t worry about not getting them upright.

Exercise: C, lh, E, rh, D, lh, F, rh – continue up the scale, keeping bells very close to table, ringing in rhythmic pulse in a steady tempo, gradually increasing speed without sacrificing smoothness. Reverse, starting with C7, rh, A, lh, B, rh, G, lh, etc. Use mallets and “traveling 2-in-hand”.

Performance tips

Microphones: I use a tiny wireless mic, the “over the ear” style used by many public speakers and singers; it follows me from one end of the bell table to the other, and picks up every bell the same. It allows me greater dynamic contrast, and avoids a harsh strike point. A “PZM” works well, as do microphones placed on booms over the bell table.

Table appearance: Match your personality style, season of the year, and concert venue. Make your table look attractive and

neat. The visual aspect of solo ringing greatly affects the audience's perception of the performer.

Personal appearance: Always dress neatly, nothing outlandish or offensive to your audience. Be careful of flashing, distracting, dangerous-to-the-bells jewelry. Wear clothes that give room for movement, don't get in the way of picking up bells, and are attractive but modest. I learned the hard way about scarves, buttons, belt buckles, jackets...Women, you might want to have someone give some advice about makeup, hair style, clothing to help you look your best. Appearance in so visual an art is very important.

Decomposing at the table: When (not "if") you have a problem, find tricks to not let the audience know. Learn how to keep a pleasant expression on your face no matter what. Even if you have to stop for a measure or two to regroup, make it seem like this is a piano interlude. Communication ahead of time with your accompanist will help that person know whether to keep going, or repeat a few measures, or do something else to accommodate your glitch. Accompaniment CDs work well as long as you are used to the tempo, which is unforgiving. I've also learned that one doesn't have to be perfect to be excellent, and that mistakes in performance are inevitable – make a light-hearted comment if it's obvious to the audience, and they'll love you for it.

Music Selection: Always remember who your audience is! Try to plan your program around what they would enjoy hearing, but don't be afraid to ring something they are unfamiliar with or funkier than they are used to hearing. Variety is good - in style, mood, techniques, tempo, dynamics, etc.

Accompanist: How I wish I could use my own everywhere I go – that's my goal! The more you ring with the same pianist, the more musical you'll become. An outstanding accompanist gives you freedom to express your music. When I have someone really wonderful, I hardly even notice the piano, as I'm lost in my own thoughts and the music in my head and heart.

Nerves: A little nervousness is good. A lot is not. Tricks to get over it: practice, perform often, picture your audience ahead of

time, practice, pick songs you know and can even think the words as you ring. Practice!!

Solo Ringing Suggestions

The goal of solo ringing is to achieve a smooth, flowing melody line following the natural rise and fall of the phrase. To ring musically and gracefully:

1. Lay out all bells from C5-C7 in keyboard order, in 2 separate rows; lower and higher bells should be added as needed. Keep bells in keyboard order except when moving a bell temporarily into a vacant space for a quicker reach.
2. Glue each note to the next with no break between. A little LV into the next note is actually a good sound, used judiciously.
3. Never cross hands, as in step-wise motion. Learn to weave, pass a bell from one hand to the other, experiment with leading with one hand and then the other to avoid excessive passing. Crossing hand over arm is allowed as long as there is at least one bell between notes being rung, and legato is maintained.
4. Keep bells very close to the table when ringing quickly, but when the note value or tempo allows, raise the bell upright, keeping bells in motion, using all the time and space a note value allows. Strive for economy of motion, with every motion having meaning.
5. Don't delay moving hands from one bell to the next. Think ahead. Choreograph your movements, and practice the same moves over and over.
6. Memorize both music and choreography and ring from the heart. Communicate the meaning of the music.
7. Adjust handbells to ring easily and not backring. Voice bells to match each other in timbre and volume.
8. Make your table set-up and personal appearance pleasing to the audience.
9. Shoulder/waist damping is reserved for bells to be rung again; damp all other bells on the table. Finger damping makes a graceful alternative to body damping.

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