Bass Bells Workshop
November 7th
OGEHR
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Handout

Playing bass bells requires bigger motions and more energy to ring, plus you change bells all the time! Overview of the techniques in the workshop :

-Posture
    You want a solid stance, with your weight on both legs. Stand tall!
-Hands
    -Wear gloves with padding as needed. Bass bells create a lot of friction.
    -Make sure your index and thumb are pointing forward (same as a smaller bell).
-Wrists
    -They are **not** the point of motion for you bell. They should stay straight and be used to hold the bell steady. The rest of your arm, the bigger muscles, will do the work of ringing the bell.

Four steps of playing a bass bell :
-Lifting
    Ideally with two hands! You can use two hands on the handle or one on the lip of the casting. If you have no other choice, try to keep your wrist steady and flex your arm at the elbow.
-Playing
    If time allows, play with both hands. It can help with strength (to play louder) or control (to play softer). Move in large circles, without your wrist(s) bending.
-Damping
    You need more surface area than for a smaller bell, otherwise it takes too long to stop ringing.
    Your shoulder, belly, the table, your other hand are all good alternatives.
    On the table, foam rests that match the casting curve can help dampen them faster, otherwise you may have to push the casting into the mat a little.
    On your shoulder, it will feel like you're hugging the bell.
    With your other hand, you can put it on the side of the casting or on the lip. The lip will create a very quick dampening.
-Table-ing
    Putting the bell on the table is as difficult as lifting it. Two hands if possible, keep your wrist steady and make sure you do not drop the bell!

If you table damp, you save yourself one of these steps! You can also lift and play at once with the back ring technique, but you'll need to practice to get the timing right.

Setting you workplace
Your bells need to be set up in a way that makes them easy to reach and play, while not clanking on each other all the time or get you confused.

-A semicircle makes them easier to reach but they are closer together. If they roll around this can be dangerous!

-Bells that play often should be closer. That Eb you only play once in bar 54 does NOT need to stay between D and E the whole piece. Be ergonomic in the way you set your bells!

-Bells that are only malleted can be set up in harder to reach place or incongruously placed, but that is fine since mallets offer you reach and you do not need its handle.

-Set your bells for the most difficult parts of the piece. Plan your choreography around that set up. Try new things! BUT:
-Watch out for changing your set-up in a way that confuses you! Sometimes your bells will be in random order and it will work, other times it will confuse you. You might need to practice the motions of your weaves separately to make something work.

-Mark your music as needed! Some assignments are harder to get your head around. If you colour-code your music, make a copy first.[1] Don't hesitate to highlight bells that you ring, especially if the assignment takes you up and down the staff. Write in bell changes as needed, maybe even which hand does what. Try to make your markings clear, but concise: you won't have time to read entire sentences while playing a concert. LH → Eb should be clear enough. Eb → G is also clear. If it isn't your bell, you'll know right away, no need to write in you have to "Take the F sharp from Patrick". I would probably simply write "F#!".

A word on assignments

Bass bells are most often played with a few ringers for many bells. It can be daunting at first, there is a lot of weaving and planning involved. Directors often assign the bells. A few considerations :

-It isn't ideal to play bass bells fast!
-It isn't ideal to play two bass bells at once
-The faster the bell changes are, the easier it is for the ringer to hurt themselves
-In scalar passages (notes next to each other) it is often impossible for one ringer to play them all
-Reading multiple bells that aren't next to each other on the music can be hard, especially for ringers with less reading experience
-The more bells one person plays, the more space they need and the harder each bell or chime is to reach. Real estate is also sometimes limited.
-Bell sharing can be hard since bass ringers are often further from each other.

Here are a few possible assignments, with some pros and cons for each. Keep in mind those are NOT the only possibilities and sometimes the best assignment looks wacky on paper and takes time to work out.

<u>1st option</u>: Linear assignments, example: Ringer 1 – C3-F3, Ringer 2 – G3-B3
Pros:
-The bells are laid out in order, it matches the page for the ringer and the visual for the director
-Close bells don't play in chords together often, limiting playing two bells at once.
Cons:

1 Yes that is technically illegal. Keep the original clean, write on the copy.

-Fast scales are near-impossible due to extremely fast weaving with heavy bells. Expect clanking on the table.
-One ringer is often doing nothing for a while and the other does nothing. Bell sharing happens frequently.

2nd option: Thirds/Lines and Spaces, example: Ringer 1 – CEGB3, Ringer 2 – DFA3
Pros:
-Scales are much easier, each ringer plays at half speed of the line. Weaving still needed, but easier to do.
-Assignments are easy to read and very clear-cut
-Workload is shared much more evenly
-Sharing of the B/Bb is simple. It is often a trouble bell with this assignment since R1 has an extra bell.
Cons:
-Fifths are the most common bell doublings and are assigned to the same ringer – lots of two-bell ringing in this one. For very chordal pieces, this will not do.
-Mallets must work on a larger range of bells

3rd option: Fourths/Hilty, example: Ringer 1 – CFB3, Ringer 2 – DG3C4, Ringer 3 – FA3D4
Pros:
-Scales split even slower due to larger spacing between the bells each ringer plays
-Chords do not often have fourths or sevenths in them that low, making playing two bells at once far more rare
-Workload is very even between the three ringers
Cons:
-The split between three ringers can be difficult to manage, especially if your group already has a dedicated CD4 player
-You need 3 ringers able to lift and play the larger bells
-Reading three notes almost an octave apart can be difficult
-Malleting can be hard – few mallets work well on that large a span.
-With some bells in different octaves, you might need to perform different techniques in both hands

Take time to look at what the piece needs and who your ringers are! Those are three ideas but by no means the only options.