

Handbell Choirs: A Tool for Musical Evangelism?

("This article was originally published in the January 2018 edition of the journal *Church Music Forward*.)

Mention handbells in a room full of organists, and you're likely to hear a variety of reactions. Some will note how angelic a bell choir can sound, and others will make reference to their usefulness during Christmastide. But you'll definitely also hear reactions like the following (all of which are real quotes I've heard from colleagues):

"Oh, thank God we don't have one of those at our church!"

"The handbell choir is my cross to bear."

"I just don't think about music as pairs of individual notes! That's the antithesis of musical expression for me!"

Until about a decade ago, I might have made some of the same comments myself. There was no handbell choir in the Roman Catholic parish where I grew up, nor were bells an instrument I was ever exposed to as a piano performance major in college. I knew very little about them, and the first time I was asked to work with a bell choir at a church job, my first impressions weren't great. Some of the ringers seemed fanatically devoted to playing bells, yet many of them couldn't read music. The pieces they played seemed simplistic and not always appropriate to the liturgy. Extremely judgmentally, I joked with a colleague that the names of the composers always sounded like the names of country music stars! Bells, I concluded, were a niche instrument for nerdy enthusiasts. I'd stick to working with the choir, thank you very much!

But then, as is the experience of so many organists, I continued to be pressed into service as the default bell choir director. And as I learned more about the instrument, my opinions began to shift. And shift. And shift. Today, the adult bell choir and the children's handchime choir are key parts of the music ministry at my church, and I firmly believe that a bell choir provides a unique path toward a dramatic increase in the number of parishioners who actively, sensitively, and authentically offer their musical gifts to God's glory.

Not convinced? Perhaps it's most helpful for me to address some prevalent myths about bell choirs head-on, and to offer my rebuttals.

Myth #1: Bells are inherently an unmusical instrument.

"I just don't think about music as pairs of individual notes," cried my colleague. Well, of course I don't either! But neither does a well-trained bell ringer. In a good bell choir, ringers shape a musical phrase just as effectively as any other instrumentalist or singer would. Indeed, under the best circumstances, ringers perhaps show more musical sensitivity than is required of some other musicians, since they must listen carefully to their fellow ringers in order to make their two (or four, or six!) notes fit perfectly into the broader musical line!

Why is this level of musicianship so often not what we see in churches, then? I'd argue that it's largely a function of training. While anybody can pick up a bell and whack it, there's actually a great deal of technique that goes into playing bells *well*. And technique is a prerequisite for artistry; at any instrument, you cannot make expressive music if you don't first master the physical gestures required to create emotion-rich sounds. Yet in many churches, the bell choir director lacks either musical or technical experience (usually not both, I hope!). I've seen many instances where the bell choir director is (as I was) an organist who knows very little about how bells work, so he doesn't know how to get the bell choir to achieve an expressive sound. Or in other instances, the bell choir director is a handbell enthusiast who has eagerly learned all the mechanical skills required, but she lacks

extensive musical training beyond what she's picked up in the world of handbells. This director may be able to mart, mallet, and play six-in-hand with gusto, but she may not have the vision to do as much with a musical line as is possible.

What's the solution? I think bell choir directors must, first and foremost, always be individuals who have just as much musical training and experience as organists and choir directors. But they also must know specifically how bells work! The best resource here is the Handbell Musicians of America. Look up your local "Area" (many of these are geographically identical to the AGO's "Regions"), and see what workshops and festivals are being offered soon in your state. I have found workshops sponsored by Handbell Musicians of America to universally be well-run by highly trained ringer-musicians. There is no better way to learn the mechanics of ringing.

Myth #2: The repertoire is uninspiring and/or inappropriate for worship.

Well, sure, *some* repertoire is uninspiring. And, just like with any other instrument, some of what's most prevalent, especially at a beginning level, is not great writing. Would you attend a recital of beginning piano students who were playing only the works of John Thompson and the Bastiens (sidebar: these are not the method books I would recommend as a piano teacher!), and then conclude that the piano lacks all potential as an instrument? One must look for the right repertoire, rather than selecting it *solely* on the basis of its difficulty level (though the handy-dandy grading system by which all bell music is leveled can certainly help narrow your search!).

There are many brilliant handbell composers working today who are writing truly interesting and innovative settings of hymntunes. Michael Helman, Cathy Moklebust, Kevin McChesney, and Fred Gramann (long-time organist at the American Church in Paris) are all go-to composers for me when I'm looking for bell pieces whose writing not only is interesting but shows insightful sensitivity to a hymn's text. For instance, here's Fred Gramann's take on DIVINUM MYSTERIUM: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWc2ALiuYTA>. This is anything but dull or unintelligent composing! For bell choirs in search of simpler, beginner-level repertoire, check out the offerings from Chorister's Guild, which are consistently both high quality and liturgically apt.

Myth #3: Handbells are expensive, they take up a lot of physical space, and they require a specific number of people: that's not a realistic use of my church's resources!

Okay, the first half of this sentence is completely true. Handbells ARE expensive (the first two octaves alone could cost you nearly \$7,000), and they do have very specific logistical requirements. But my response is that they are worth it, specifically because of the potential handbells have as a tool for both musical and liturgical evangelism.

I fervently believe that the first role of any church's music director is that of a teacher. No amount of brilliant organ voluntaries will matter if the people in the congregation are not themselves actively involved in making music. And yes, I also clearly believe that the human voice (the one instrument directly created by God!) should be the primary source of music in our worship. (See my article in the March 2017 edition of CMF for more of my thoughts on that front!) But any teacher must also be a pragmatist, and the reality is that not everyone in our pews feels confidently ready to join the choir. Our voices are, by definition, our selves, so exposing them to the world can be terrifying: singing can feel like taking a bath in public! For some people, handbells are far less intimidating. The same note is going to come ringing out of your hand no matter who you are.

And remember that infamous complaint about handbell ringers being in charge of only two notes? Well, that means that it's pretty easy to take someone who has zero musical training and to start them ringing. Yes, I color-code notes and write in counts for some beginning ringers (although I also work to wean them off these crutches as soon as is realistically possible). Virtually anyone can learn to ring more quickly than they might pick up another instrument. At the same time, there is always more to

learn in terms of ringing expressively and musically! Bottom line: Bells are an easy “gateway drug” for turning non-musicians into musicians!

Because handbells are still something of a niche instrument and not something you find everywhere, they’re also sometimes more exciting to people than other musical endeavors. In my current congregation, I have struggled (and, honestly, failed) to create a children’s choir. My church draws people from a 30-mile radius, and especially with this wide geographic pool, it can be hard to get parents to bring their kids back to church for a weeknight rehearsal. “My daughter loves to sing,” I’m often told, “but she’s already in the chorus at school!” (The problems inherent in that statement are probably worthy of their own article, but let’s gloss over that for now!) Handbells and handchimes, though: these consistently hook the kids! What 7-year-old boy doesn’t get excited about swinging a heavy metal object through the air? My children’s handchime choir boasts a full set of 11 ringers (enough to play three octaves), and I’m always finding more kids who want to be involved!

As for the liturgical evangelism piece of the puzzle: First, I believe I am evangelizing whenever I take any member of the congregation from passive attendance at worship services to active involvement (especially involvement in making music!). But secondly, because a good bell choir is hard to come by, handbell enthusiasts who don’t worship at my church often approach me looking for opportunities to ring. And because, yes, you need a certain number of ringers in order to play a certain number of octaves, I am often able to find excuses to involve these people, at least as substitute ringers. This means more bodies in the pews, more ears hearing the Gospel, and more hearts observing a Christian community in its weekly life. Surely this is what we are called to do!

I don’t mean to imply that starting a bell choir is a necessity for every church. But if you have people in your congregation who want to ring, it can be a possibility worth exploring. The bells are expensive, but they are ideally priced to be covered by someone’s memorial fund. The physical footprint is large, but there are often creative ways to fit all those bell tables *somewhere* in the sanctuary. The commitment needed from ringers can be extensive – but my experience is that, when people know their presence is indispensable (more so than it might be in the vocal choir), they show up. And even if a bell choir isn’t the right choice for your current church, it might be something you are called to do at your next job. Don’t dread it. Embrace the teaching possibilities! I certainly have.

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