

Chapter Nine

Handbells for persons with visual impairment The work of Adele Trytko at the Perkins School Guidelines for teaching new material Adding words to instrumental music

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Handbells for persons with visual impairment

Persons with visual impairment, and especially those who also have other handicapping conditions, can benefit greatly from involvement in a bell choir. Each ringer can develop skills in coordination, orientation to the environment, and social skills based upon sounds and abilities that each person brings to the ensemble. The organization of the handbell choir provides instant feedback about the choices made by each person and also provides reinforcement for each person to continue to strive for increased levels of participation.

Many persons with visual impairment have advanced aural skills that include perfect pitch and a superior sense of rhythm. For those who cannot learn handbell music by rote, it is possible to structure cues for playing based upon counting or a series of words applied to the music at hand.

Visual impairment can create social isolation, but in the handbell choir each person becomes an acceptable part of a social unit that provides new friendships and a link to the world at large through public performance. Persons with greater musical gifts can assume roles of leadership, and their success motivates all participants to work harder to make pleasing sounds together.

The skills developed in making music together with bells reinforce positive attitudes and assist each student in adapting to learning in other subject areas. When you compare the skills developed in this setting to those that are usually acquired in other areas of the curriculum, they are generally head and shoulders above the rest.

The work of Adele Trytko at the Perkins School

For many years Adele Trytko has directed handbells at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts. Her choirs are recognized in the area for their ability to produce beautiful music (including some standard arrangements) and for the annual festival that brings several choirs together for massed ringing that includes the Perkins choir.

Many of Adele's arrangements combine the sound of bells with other instruments including piano, harp, and synthesizer. She usually plays the harp but has taught some of her students to play harp and synthesizer.

During her tenure at the Perkins School Adele has noticed that students develop and improve in the following skill areas:

1. Because they are good listeners, they develop good musical awareness and demonstrate naturally acquired aural skills.
2. Their educated ears allows them to develop excellent sense of pitch and rhythm. These skills also enhance aural memory.
3. In the familiar setting of the handbell choir students experience success more quickly.
4. Students learn to concentrate and focus their attention on the sound of the bells. This enhances the learning process.
5. Students learn to recognize relationships between notes. This opens the way for self-expression and increased enjoyment.
6. The use of language coordinated with music enhances their communication skills and increases the speed of the learning process.
7. The motor skills that come to play in the handbell choir develop more appropriate body movements.
8. When a more advanced student coordinates the ringing and placement of multiple bell assignments, he/she develops more tactile/spatial awareness and problem solving skills.

9. All ringers develop skills that enhance basic psychological needs such as acceptance, success, status, and independence.

Adele emphasizes these goals in handbell ringing: (1) listening skills, (2) attention to task, (3) ear/hand coordination, (4) auditory processing, (5) motor skills, (6) spatial awareness, (7) musical expression, (8) aural memory, (9) social skills, (10) self-esteem, and (11) problem solving.

Guidelines for teaching new material

Adele works with individuals and smaller groups before putting them together as a choir. This flexibility has been very important in her work in a school where the primary focus is on life skills and job skills.

1. Play a recording of the piece while setting up bells for rehearsal. Recordings are also provided for students listening outside of class.
2. Use the sound of the piano to enhance the learning process by playing individual parts and smaller combination of parts.
3. Call attention to the key signature and the time signature. It is important to help students understand the theoretical basis of making music together.
4. Practice music by sections or phrases. Students with different abilities would require special groupings and focus on more difficult passages.
5. Provide individual instruction when necessary. Play the part on the piano along with the ringer to increase memory and understanding.
 - a. Sing note names and beats when needed. Identify chords and note placement when needed.
 - b. Use verbal and/or hands on directives to enhance musical and motor responses.
6. Develop a text for instrumental pieces to assist with musical cues (more on this later in the chapter).
7. Always look for melodic cues in the score, whether in melody, counter-melody, interlude, or bass line.

8. Begin with a tempo that is workable with each group and each individual. Gradually increase tempo to the speed required for the entire ensemble.
9. Note all passages that are the same, are repeated, are in sequence, are transposed, are double time, etc.
10. Once a piece is memorized, have students ring along with the recording and/or the piano to develop continuity and perseverance in performance.

Adele's ringers rehearse twice each week – once in a 50 minute full ensemble and once in a smaller group or individual experience (also 50 minutes). She recommends the following regimen for rehearsal:

1. Review on piece from the current repertoire.
2. Improve musicality of a current piece in progress.
3. Use the time left to address memorizing parts of new music.

Some of Adele's more capable students have been able to ring solos with handbells. The diagram below illustrates the placement of seventeen bells for an arrangement of *O Holy Night*:

D5	F5	F#5	A5	D6	F6	F#6	A6	
C5	E5	G5	B5	C6	E6	G6	B6	C7

The lines represent masking tape that provided a visual guide.

Adding words to instrumental music

The idea of following words as cues for handbell ringing is not new. Many choirs use the "Ring Along" series of publications, in which words of the singers are circled when it is time for a bell to ring.

Adele Trytko creates words for all pieces that her choirs play – even if the piece has no original words. This gives the participants verbal cues that they can use to coordinate their ringing. On the next page is a short instrumental piece by Mozart. Words have been added to cover every rhythmic idea in the piece. Note that in the second ending additional words have been added to cover the extra notes.

Minuet

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W. A. Mozart, arr. Pinson

It is fun to play hand - bells. It is fun to make
mu - sic. We will play ev' - ry note, ev - ry sin - gle note
just as we know to do. do. do, we know to do.

The bell assignments are as follows: Ringer 1 - B4, C5, Ringer 2 - C#5, D5, Ringer 3 - E5, F#5, Ringer 4 - G5, A5, Ringer 5 - B5, C6, Ringer 6 - C#6, D6, Ringer 7 - E6, F#6, Ringer 8 - G6, A6, Ringer 9 - B6, G4. Mark you part below:

It is fun to play handbells. It is fun to make music.

We will play ev'-ry note, ev'-ry single note.

Just as we know to do (do, we know to do.)