

A Director's Perspective

Amy Maakestad

Never before has the handbell community experienced a pandemic. The COVID-19 virus has thrown rehearsals, concerts, worship services, workshops, festivals, and fellowship into disarray. Although it will be possible for us at some point to return to a new kind of normal, it most certainly will not be soon.

What do we do in the meantime? How do we keep the art of handbells alive? How do we care for our ringers and ourselves? What is safe?

We have been given the gift of time. Be gentle with yourself and allow room to grieve what has been lost. Changing and canceling plans is frustrating and disappointing, the uncertainty of what the future holds can cause anxiety, and this gift of time may be unwanted. Accepting all of this change happens at a different pace for everyone and that is okay. We will get through this.

When you are ready to move forward, it might be helpful to reimagine what your handbell program will look like in the near future and for the next year or so. Music that inspires you is a good place to start.

- Do you have piles of sample copies that deserve a second (or first) look?
- What about pieces for smaller ensembles that were impossible to organize during the regular season?
- Should your music files be revisited with fresh eyes?
- Are there pieces that were too easy or wouldn't keep ringers busy that were passed over which may now be exactly what you need?

Engage with community groups both in your area and far beyond, and learn something new. They will not be playing live concerts anytime soon, but there may be virtual concerts at some point and likely educational opportunities and imaginative ideas in the interim.

Safely ringing with a full choir will not be easy in the next year. In addition to following the CDC and local guidelines, talk with your ringers about their comfort level. Those with underlying health conditions and/or advanced age may need to be on hiatus or ring as a soloist only. You can connect with your members through regular video meetings and offer encouragement and praise if you have small ensembles that are able to record music. Emails, texts, and handwritten notes are great ways to keep on touch. Share your favorite YouTube clips of pieces you hope to play someday.

Now is your chance to simplify music, personnel, rehearsal time and number of bells used. Make the most of what you have and let creativity and necessity be your guide. In a church setting, it really helps if worship planning is happening well in advance.

- Can you utilize ringers from the same family? That makes physical distancing a non issue.
- Can you play with one, two, or three ringers physically distanced and not sharing equipment?
- To shorten rehearsal time, can a solo piece be played with two or three ringers?
- Have you looked at 8-bell or 12-bell music?
- Don't forget about bell trees for lots of sound with only one ringer.
- Can a ringer or two play the melody of a hymn as an introduction or interlude?
- Could the same ringer or two also play a descant?
- Random ring on a pentatonic hymn stanza.
- Add a track to the praise team recording by following simple chords on a lead sheet.
- Play a solo you have been meaning to work up with a distanced accompanist or recorded accompaniment.
- Vocal choirs won't be meeting in the near future. Can you work with the choir director to identify singers who would like to learn to ring?

- Basic ringing skills can be taught in a couple of minutes. Children, youth, singers and instrumentalists are all potential new ringers.
- Teach a simple processional by rote and then ring it without actually processing. Use it as a hymn introduction or even postlude.

When we are able to gather more than a couple of ringers, what will this look like?

- Do you have enough room in your current rehearsal/performance space to allow for distancing?
- Can you ring a piece without bell changes and use music stands instead of tables?
- Are 2-3 octave pieces going to be more successful?
- Could adding keyboard help to cover missing notes and enhance the sound?

Thankfully, technology allows us to stay connected even when we can't be together in person. Research new music offerings and pieces you may have missed on your favorite publisher's websites. Get on social media and join a handbell forum. Follow your favorite composers because many are creating new, usable, practical content right now.

These words I've seen on social media help me to put things in perspective: We isolate now so that when we gather again, no one is missing.



Amy Maakestad has more than 35 years of experience ringing handbells in various groups and over 20 as a conductor. She utilizes both ringing and directing talents as the Artistic and Music Director of Twin Cities Bronze, a position she has held since 2012.

Amy has traveled the country with the ensemble and as a clinician at handbell festivals and workshops. She has worked with all ages and skill levels of handbell musicians and has a passion for sharing knowledge of the instrument.

Working as a church musician has been a calling for Amy for the past 25 years. She enjoys pulling out all the stops while playing organ, piano, accompanying, directing and worship planning. Her biggest thrill is learning from all of the wonderful volunteer musicians of all ages she feels privileged to know.

Amy received her Bachelor's Degree in Piano Performance from the University of Wisconsin, Superior. She later received her Master's in Sacred Music – Organ and Choral Conducting from Luther Seminary, St. Paul in cooperation with St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota.

Discovering new (and rediscovering old) handbell music and turning the printed notes on a page into a musical experience is one of Amy's favorite joys. In her spare time, she bakes, gardens, reads, enjoys her family and drinks coffee.



COVID19@HandbellIndustryCouncil.org