

I highly recommend looking at a copy of the music for *any* piece before you purchase it. "Easy" is a *relative* term depending on the ability of a group; furthermore, the AGEHR level designations are quite broad. I also recommend erring on the side of "too easy."

I firmly believe it is better to play something easy and play it accurately and musically than to play something a little harder and just play notes, possibly many wrong notes.

Here are some of my thoughts on evaluating the rhythmic and melodic difficulties when choosing music for beginning ringers; they are listed in progressive order of difficulty.

1. FULL CHORDS

- a. Most ringers play most of the time
- b. All ringers have the same rhythm

2. MOSTLY CHORDS

- a. Most ringers play most of the time
- b. All ringers *in the same clef or range* have the same rhythm
 - i. Bass clef = different rhythm from treble clef
 - ii. Treble clef = rhythm different from bass clef but entire treble clef has same rhythm
 - iii. Treble clef = different rhythm between treble bells and middle bells
 - iv. Middle bells might have a rhythm that matches the bass clef rhythm but differs from the rhythm of the higher bells on the treble clef

3. MOSTLY CHORDS with a CLEAR MELODIC LINE

- a. Most ringers play most of the time
- b. *Clear melodic line can be seen on the music and heard*
 - i. Melody in the bass bells, possibly doubled in the lower part of the middle octave with chords in the high bells
 - ii. Melody stays on the top note of the treble clef chords.
- c. *Melodic line buried in the middle bells is harder* for the ringers to "spot"
 - i. Inexperienced ringers have difficulty recognizing doubled melodic notes that are buried in the middle of large chords, even when the melody can be seen on the top note of the chord.
 - ii. Tell them which of their notes are melodic notes and have them circle them so that they know to bring out those notes more than they would an accompaniment note **or**
 - iii. Mark the melodic line in the music *before* distributing it.
(My choir has discovered that a small green dot to the left of a note helps them see the melodic note; the color and location of this mark does not resemble any other handbell mark.)
 - iv. Consider marking the entire melodic line for all the treble ringers so that they can visualize how the melody moves towards or away from their own notes.
(I would not do that with extremely easy music.)

4. TEXTURE - music with a thin texture is much harder than it looks

- a. Big chords look fearsome on keyboard music but are a source of "moral support" in beginning bell music
- b. An *exposed melodic line* with very little support under it can be intimidating.

5. CONTRASTING RHYTHMS

- a. Rests **on** beat 1 in 3/4 and **ties across the bar line** can occur in Level 1 music.
- b. These can create problems for a choir that has difficulty counting independent rhythms

6. BELL CHANGES-**beginning music does not (or should not) have bell changes.**

- a. Look at the bell row to see which ringing positions have changes.
- b. Study the score to see where and how often the changes occur. (Sometimes there is only one.)

6. BELL CHANGES (continued)

- c. How many beats or measures are there before the change and after it before changing back to the original bell? (One or more measures make the change easier.)
- d. Is the ringer in that ringing position capable of handling that change?
- e. Look for other positions that could easily handle the bell change.
- f. Reassign the accidental to another ringer if that is more workable.

7. PAGE TURNS must eventually be conquered

- a. Have partners decide who can most easily turn the page.
- b. Practice the page turn by starting a few measures before it and ringing past the turn.

8. MUSIC WITH 8th NOTES creates new problems

- a. Look for pairs of 8th notes that stay in the same hand or at least in the same ringer.
- b. Running eighth notes are much harder than the pairs described above because the pair often moves between two ringing positions, leaving someone playing only the after beat.

9. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS that might make the music more challenging

- a. Tempo changes
- b. Meter changes
- c. Key changes mean bell changes for *at least* one ringer per octave
- d. Repeats and modified repeats (D.C. al Fine, D.S. al Coda, etc.) are all potential pitfalls
- e. Small print is very hard to read at the distance needed for bell music
- f. Techniques
 - i. Techniques that keep the bell *in the hand*, such as SK, RT, and TD are best for beginners.
 - ii. Consider the difficulty of changing from *ring* to another technique and back to *ring* depends on the technique and the amount of time between the two techniques.
(I have encountered appealing Level 1 compositions with quick changes from PL to R that make an otherwise excellent, easy piece much more difficult!)
 - iii. Be aware that many handbell techniques cannot or should not be played by chimes.

10. AGEHR LEVELS and their broad definitions

- a. Level 1: Uses 2/4, 3/4 or 4/4 meter and moderate tempo; has nothing shorter than quarter notes; should not have bell changes. Some Level 1 music is *not* beginning material.
- b. Level 2: Can include eighth notes and easy bell changes (see #6 and #8 above)
Some Level 2 music is *easier* than Level 1 music, depending on the *reason* it was designated Level 2. Study the music with *your own group* in mind, looking at the scores carefully and asking yourself “Why was it classified at this level?” Was it—
 - i. *Bell changes?* - Bell changes that made it Level 2 might be easy changes for your ringers in the positions affected by those changes.
 - ii. *Eighth notes?* - It might be a good, relatively easy, chordal piece with very few independent rhythms; if your group can count and ring 8th notes, they can probably handle it.
 - iii. *Tempo and/or meter changes?* - Here again, it might be a good, chordal piece with very few independent rhythms; if your group can cope with these tempo and meter changes, it might be a viable piece.
- c. Levels 3, 4 and 5 are NOT EASY!

Nothing encourages a new group *or* a group with a low level of self-confidence *more* than success. They will feel more successful if they are confident that they can play the music. In most churches (and schools) the average congregation (audience) usually cannot discern whether a piece is easy or hard but they are touched by music that sounds good.