

Various Opinions about Marking Music

There are two prevailing opinions about marking music for the ringers.

1. Some directors strongly discourage any such aids perhaps because they...
 - a. Are musical purists
 - b. Have skilled ringers who don't need color coded music
 - c. Have enough people in the program to run a special group for beginning readers
 - d. Are not willing to use a crutch, even temporarily, for ringers who need it
 - e. Fear that marking music will keep the ringer from ever learning to read music
2. Other directors, including at least two nationally known clinicians, recommend doing whatever is necessary to enable willing ringers to play bells. Many directors are aware that the problems faced by new ringers in a handbell choir are far different from those encountered by beginners on other instruments.
 - a. Ringers must isolate their two notes, often buried in a stack of many notes. We don't ask any other beginning music reader to cope with such a complex task.
 - b. Ringers must pick out their two notes whenever they occur in the score. It is **much** harder to play a few intermittent notes than to play or sing all the notes across a horizontal line. This unique problem often challenges some experienced musicians the first time they ring in a handbell choir.
 - c. A beginning ringer can also be confused by the "different" look of three consecutive notes for the same bell because the 1st note might be on the top of a triad, the next note on the bottom of a "third" and the 3rd note might be somewhere in the middle of a full chord.
 - d. Color coding helps new ringers spot their notes in the midst of the stack, giving them a much better chance of ringing the correct note at the correct time.

My General Approach

I permit marked music for those who *need* that help because it enables new ringers of all ages to become a viable, contributing member of the choir; otherwise they would be left out *or* my choice of music for our multi-generational bell choir would be very limited.

I *personally* mark the music before I pass it out because...

1. It saves rehearsal time. (I played in one choir where experienced ringers stood and waited while all the nonreaders marked their music. What a waste of rehearsal time!)
2. Letting each ringer mark his copy produces messy music full of marks that are often unintelligible to other ringers who might use that copy in the future. (When I took my current job, the files were full of music that was absolutely unusable because most of it was obliterated by highlighting in as many as four different colors with no discernable consistency to the pattern of colors.)
3. Marking the music myself helps insure that it is marked correctly; even though I do make mistakes occasionally, my marks are neat and accurate most of the time. I don't rely ringers who have trouble reading notation to mark the music accurately.
4. I use a consistent method for marking any ringing position. A ringer unfamiliar with a specific position could move to and read any marked position in my choir.
5. My experience has demonstrated that the ringers learn more quickly by playing from correctly marked music than they do from spending rehearsal time trying to mark their own music. (I provide supplementary worksheets to help them learn the names of notes.)

Recommended Marking Tools

1. Use artist quality colored pencils instead of felt markers.
 - a. The pencil marks do not bleed through the music.
 - b. Although these pencil marks can not be erased completely, pastel colors can be corrected if you have not pressed too hard when coloring the notes.
2. Several brands of pencils can be purchased at an art supply store for less than \$1.50 each.
 - a. PRISMACOLOR and SPECTRACOLOR pencils are softer and easier to use.
 - b. Sanford VERITHIN pencils have a thinner, harder lead which lasts longer but requires more effort to color the notes.
3. Four colors are needed.
 - a. Pink
 - b. Light blue, sky blue, or aqua
 - c. True green or grass green
 - d. Canary yellow
4. Normal pencil – No. 2 (for marking bell changes and counting if necessary)
5. Eraser stick with a soft eraser that does not leave smudges or tear the paper

What to Mark


1. Color code all notes for new ringers who are just learning to read music.
2. Mark bell changes for ringers who
 - a. Need help managing bell changes
 - b. Have been asked to cover additional bells outside their assignment
 - c. Have some very difficult bell changes in the piece
3. Use a normal pencil to write the counting for ringers who will have difficulty with the rhythm in a few specific measures; align the beat numbers directly under or over the notes.

Guidelines for Color Coding Music

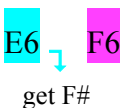
These suggestions work best when using standard ringing positions and notebooks designated for specific ringing positions. Individual copies of the music should be numbered to match the notebook numbers; ringing positions that share a notebook should remain consistent from rehearsal to rehearsal and year to year. (Refer to my “free advice” document on sharing notebooks for details.)

1. Use two different colors for a position, one color for each hand; use the same color for both the natural note and its sharp or flat.
 - a. Pastel colors work well because they are light enough for the notes to show through.
 - b. My primary choice is *pink and light blue* or *aqua*
 - c. I use *yellow and green* for the 2nd ringer on a shared notebook.
2. Give the ringers an easy way to remember which color designates the right hand.
 - a. With pink and blue, *think of pink as red*: **red** is for the **right hand**
 - b. With yellow and green, *think of yellow as a light color*: **light** is for the **right hand**
3. Mark *your* score first.
 - a. Color code the notes on the *bells needed chart* to indicate the positions that are color coded in the ringers’ parts.
 - b. Color code each marked position in your music so that you know how each ringer’s score is marked. (Although I don’t color every note in my score of a very easy piece, I have noticed that the color coding in my score makes it easier to mark the individual parts quickly. When I mark a piece for *weaning* from coding, I do mark my score to match the coding in the parts. Marking the bell changes in my score is also helpful.)

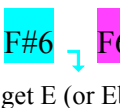
4. Mark the individual parts.
 - a. Color the ringer's notes on the *bells needed chart*.
 - b. Color each note assigned to the ringer with a small, filled-in circle slightly larger than the note head.
 - c. Filled-in circles are easier to see at a distance than a normal, open circle.
 - d. With this method the rhythm is still visible and the music does not look messy or cluttered.
5. Ideas for color coding bell changes
 - a. Simple bell changes
 - i. Draw a downward arrow with the correct color to indicate which bell should be put down. (I make the arrow longer than shown in the examples.)
 - ii. The absence of any other marks means the ringer should pick up the flat, sharp, or natural with the *same* letter name and continue to ring *that* bell which is now marked with the color assigned to that hand.

Example for E6/F6:  (means put down F, pickup F# or put down F# and get F)

- b. Bell changes that require ringing the new bell with the "wrong" hand
 - i. Draw a downward arrow of the correct color to indicate which bell should be put down *and*
 - ii. Using a normal pencil (because the pastel colors don't show up well for text) print the letter name of the "wrong" bell that should be picked up

Example for E6/F6:  (means put down E, pickup F# with the left hand or "E" hand)
get F#

- iii. The F-sharps are colored aqua as long as that bell stays in the left hand. The bell change back to the normal bell is marked according to item ii.

Example for E6/F6:  (means put down F#, pickup E {or Eb} with the left hand)
get E (or Eb)

My Preferred Positions for Ringers Who Need Color Coded Music

These are the positions I choose for new ringers if I can create an opening at any of those positions.

1. The size of the ringer, their attention span and other factors influence which one I use.
 - a. D5/E5 (position 5) (This is one reason I like to reserve folder 5 for one ringer.)
 - b. B6/C7 (position 11) (This is a one-ringer notebook in my choir.)
 - c. B4/C5 (position 4)
 - d. C4/D4 (position 1) (This is a one-ringer notebook in my choir.)
2. Using these positions whenever possible means that the older music in my files might already be marked for some of those positions. (This is the advantage of color coding the *bells needed chart* on my score; I can readily see what parts are marked from a previous year.)

Options for Marked Music and Shared Notebooks

1. The best choice: Ringers who are using marked music should have their own notebook.
2. Next best idea: Ringers who need marked music can share with a ringer who doesn't need marked music and isn't distracted by the color-coding for the stand partner.
3. When two ringers who need marked music must share one notebook, use a different pair of colors for each ringer
 - a. Pink and aqua for one stand partner
 - b. Yellow and green for the other stand partner

Weaning Ringers Away from the Color Coding Crutch

I have tried the following ideas when coding a new piece of music for ringers who have played the same position long enough to make good progress at recognizing their notes.

1. When the same chord or pitch is repeated, mark the note in the *first chord only*.
2. When a passage alternates hands across one or several measures, mark the notes in the *first pattern only*.
3. Mark only the *first occurrence* of a melody or chordal passage that is repeated again in the next few measures.
4. Mark only the *first measure or pattern* of a repetitious accompaniment pattern.
5. Mark only the *first A section* of a composition in ABA or rondo form.

Depending on how many parts must be marked, this can be a time consuming process but I feel it is worth my time. Using this system of marking for seven years in my current position has made it possible to integrate new ringers of all ages into one choir, achieving the goal of enjoyable, successful ringing without tears and frustration for new ringers. It has been my experience that most of these new ringers gradually learned to ring from unmarked music.

NOTE: Color coding is an aid to tracking and reading notes. It is unrelated to other marks that skilled ringers might write in their music or any notations a director might ask all ringers to put in the music.

Carol R. Dare
December 2008