



Judging

'Judge not, that ye be not judged' says the Bible, but perhaps ringers should invert that message. After all, we can't help being judged to some degree by anyone within earshot of the tower. Local residents and passers by might not have a particular interest in the ringing, but they will automatically form an impression of the sound, favourable or otherwise. Lay people know very little of the intricacies of ringing, but they can tell the difference between good striking and bad. In that sense we will be judged whether we like it or not.

Most ringers never try to judge a piece of ringing, but if you have ever tried, you probably found it made you more acutely aware of the difference between good and bad striking. Perhaps if more of us made some attempt at judging, even informally, then we would be more conscious of our own striking, and that would benefit all those who hear us ringing. So returning to the quotation from St Matthew, our inverted version might be something like: 'You will be judged, so you might as well learn how to judge'. It is less elegant, and needs more explanation, but it leads to this month's theme.

Scores

Ringing competitions are almost always judged in terms of 'faults'. In other forms of music that is rather unusual. *Tail End* is only aware of one precedent for this style of judging conventional music. While Walther von Stolzing sang his mastersong to the assembled Mastersingers and citizens of Nuremberg, Sixtus Beckmesser, sitting hidden in his box, marked faults furiously, and very audibly, on his slate. Wagner was obviously not impressed with this style of judging or he would hardly have cast Beckmesser as a villain in the opera.

But ringing is not quite like ordinary music. The performers have no control over intonation, timbre or pitch. The notes, intensity and quality of the sound are fixed by the bell mechanics. The ringers can only control one thing – timing, which is more readily quantified than these other musical attributes. Since there is a 'gold standard' of perfect striking – completely even timing – it is perhaps not surprising that we have inherited a scheme of judging based on the degree of timing deviation from that ideal. It seems perfectly reasonable to give highest accord to a band that deviates least from a perfectly even rhythm.

Defining the ideal is easy, but things become harder when we try to quantify the deviations, and that leads us into the perennial question of what exactly a 'fault' is.

What is 'a fault'?

Figure 1 (a) shows six blows struck evenly, and Figure 1 (b) shows the 3rd striking too early. Time travels to the right, and the black blobs represent the time of each blow. The grey lines are evenly spaced, and provide a visual guide.

Few people would disagree that the lower row represents a fault.

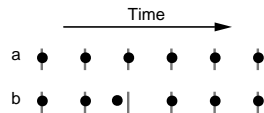


Figure 1: A 'fault'

But what about the rows shown in Figure 2? In row (a), the deviation is about half of that in Figure 1. Each row shows a progressively larger deviation, and in row (d) the bell that should be in 3rds place, strikes closer to 2nds place, than to 3rds place. Are they all faults? Do they all merit an equal mark?

Consider row (a) first. As drawn, the deviation is about 10% of the interval between places. If the rest of the ringing is even, it will be clearly audible to many people, but some ringers won't be able to hear it.

Row (b) is drawn as about 25% of the interval – clearly audible to most people. Row (c) will give a distinctly 'dotted' rhythm. Row (d) will sound like a clip, and row (e) will be a crunch.

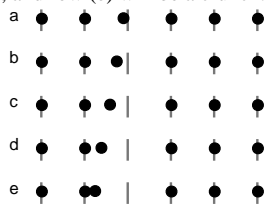


Figure 2: 'Faults' of varying sizes

We would all like errors to be few and far between, but life isn't always like that. What happens if more than one bell deviates in the same row? In Figure 3 (a) the bell in 3rds place strikes too early, as it does in (b), in which the bell in 5th place is also the late by the same amount. Should (b) score twice as badly as (a)? In (c), two bells deviate by the same amounts as in (b), but they do so together, producing one nasty clip instead of two smaller bumps. Is that worse or better than (b)? Finally, in (d) half the bells are out of place, giving an overall dotted rhythm, with no blows properly spaced. How should that rate against (b) or (c)? And if things get really rough, how would you score (e) in comparison with the others?

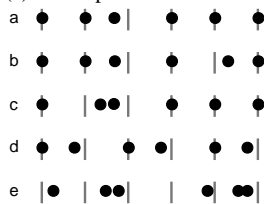


Figure 3: Multiple 'faults'

Being practical

From these illustrations, you can see that the simple question 'what is a fault' has a less than simple answer. Most judges use some sort of grading scheme, say a half fault for an uneven blow and a whole fault for a clip. Some score individual clips and gaps (which can occur more than once per row) while others form an impression of the quality of the whole row, and score that.

Looking at the examples above, you might think that it needs something more than just half or whole faults to separate the degrees of roughness. There is some truth in that, but remember that when judging, you get a new row thrown at you every two seconds. In that time, you must diagnose it (and put the result on paper) or you won't properly hear the next row. Any

scheme has to be simple to be workable.

Setting a standard

Striking in some competitions is of an extremely high standard. With near perfect ringing, there are only occasional tiny deviations, perhaps like Figure 2 (a) or (b). You need to concentrate to spot them (rather than just being mesmerised by the beauty of the music) but you can at least adopt the simple rule of marking down anything that you hear.

Now imagine yourself at the other end of the scale, with difficult bells and/or less experienced bands. If most rows are like Figure 3 (e), and you mark every blow that you can hear out of place, then you will put hundreds of marks on the sheet, and your hand will ache before the end (assuming that you can keep up). If you saturate yourself like this, it is harder to differentiate between poor and awful blows. So you have to do something that can be harder than learning to spot blows out of place – setting a threshold of moderate unevenness that you will accept, and only scoring what exceeds your threshold. It is easier on your wrist but harder on your brain, but it should give you a better measure of the quality of the ringing. The difficulty in a real competition, is knowing what the standard will be when the first team rings.

Having a go

Can anyone have a go at judging? Obviously most of us aren't likely to be invited to judge someone's branch striking competition, because you need to be experienced. And to become experienced you need to ...

So how can you start? You don't have to be 'the' judge in order to sit down, concentrate and score a piece of ringing. You could just find yourself a quiet corner and have a go. You will learn most when there is something with which to compare your results. At a real competition, you can compare your scores with the judge's. But you don't need to wait for a competition. A group of you could just sit down together, score several pieces of ringing, and then discuss your results at the end. If you have some recordings of ringing, it is interesting to repeat the exercise, and then compare your results with the first time. Choose fairly good ringing to start with, to avoid the saturation problem described above.

Your results might be different from the others. No two people hear things exactly the same way. It is quite likely that your scores overall will be either higher or lower than the others. That just indicates that you have a higher or lower threshold. The more useful comparison is how you score different pieces of ringing relative to each other. To normalise them (ie put them on the same footing) add all your own scores together, divide each score by this number, and multiply by 100 (to give reasonable sized numbers). That allows you to compare how each of you rated each piece of ringing.

You might think you will never be a 'real' judge, because there are already more than enough judges for the limited number of competitions. In fact, that is not always so. It can be difficult to find available and willing judges for competitions, so the more people who learn something about judging, the bigger the pool of potential judges will become. And of course, with more of us listening critically to striking, maybe that will improve as well.

Tail End