



I got rhythm

George Gershwin almost certainly knew nothing about ringing, but he understood the importance of rhythm in music. An even rhythm is important in ringing too, see *The Learning Curve* July 1999 (Vol 1, Ch 2), but it gets less attention than it should.

Ringling Skills describes the complementary skills of rhythm, listening and ropesight. Of course ringing draws on many other skills, especially in relation to learning and conducting methods, but they are mainly 'knowing skills' (as described in *The Learning Curve* in February) and they rely on the presence of the underlying 'doing skills' discussed in April.

Rhythm in ringing

Rhythm provides the foundation on which everything else rests. Strictly, 'rhythm' is not a skill – the skill is the ability to ring rhythmically. Look up 'rhythmic' in a dictionary and you see something like 'recurring with measured regularity'. That neatly sums up good striking, and one dictionary even includes as an example a quotation from Galsworthy: 'the rhythmic chiming of church bells'.

So what contributes to this rhythmic skill, and how can you acquire it? In fact there are two different rhythms: the rhythm of the bells striking, that you must listen to, to tell whether you are striking in the right place, and the rhythm of your bell swinging, which you need to control in order to fit in and strike well. It is this second rhythm that we discuss here.

First, you need a sense of rhythm – the ability to feel when your bell swings evenly, and to detect any deviations from that. Second, you need to synchronise your actions, and the bell's, to fit the rhythm. Third, you must be able to maintain the rhythm in the face of disturbances. So if another bell goes wrong, or if you make a slip and have to correct it, you can still hang on to the rhythm.

Ringling a bell well is an amazing feat, if you think about it. Swinging a few hundredweight of metal on the end of a piece of rope to better than a tenth of a second precision requires good rhythm, as well as good handling. But if you feel what the bell is doing and work with it, it can become like an extension of yourself, just as a pencil does when you are writing.

I've (not) got rhythm?

'Someone advised me (especially when I ring on 12) that I must look and not try to ring by rhythm. He says this is because I am not getting the right rhythm.'

This suggests that rhythm is dispensable, contrary to what is said above, but it is always worth trying to look beneath the surface of conflicting advice rather than just dismissing it. Of course, we don't know how good or bad was the ringing that prompted this particular advice, so any conclusions will be general.

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Different people undoubtedly use different combinations of rhythm and looking when they ring. They might or might not be conscious of how much each influences them, but if there is not a rhythmic component, then the ringing will not be accurate. The heavier the bells, the more this is so. On large (10, 12) and very small (4) numbers it is virtually impossible to strike well without strong reliance on rhythm. So if the recipient of this advice was not getting the right rhythm, the answer should surely be to try to improve it, rather than abandon it.

There is some sense in what this advisor says though. Rhythm is not a magic wand to solve all problems. Good rhythm helps you to stay in the right place, or to move accurately from one place to the next, but you have to start in the right place (or be pretty close and know what your errors are) and you have to be able to hear where you are striking. (Note the difference between knowing what place you should be in, and knowing (accurately) what place your bell really is striking in!) If you get badly out, or if the ringing is too confused, you probably won't be able to hear properly, so you won't know how accurately you are striking, and you will have to resort to other means of getting near the right place. Even so, using rhythm should help to smooth out undue turbulence in your position.



I got rhythm

What is wrong?

First you need to understand the problem. Is your rhythm unsteady? Is it odd (hand v back)? Are the dodges too big (eg 6 or 8 bell sized dodges when ringing 12)? Does it drift?

Unsteadiness can be caused by handling problems. It is more likely ringing a bell that provides less rhythmic support, for example round the front on 12, ringing a light bell that spends a significant part of the time over the balance. Paradoxically, excessive reliance on ropesight also degrades rhythm because it encourages last minute timing decisions. Worrying about spotting every rope in time to follow it leaves you continually exposed, whereas being able to place your next blow by rhythm, whether or not you spot a rope to follow, boosts your confidence. Even if the other rope isn't there, you know you can still strike in the correct place – you can glide over other people's mistakes.

The bell might cause hand-back imbalance, or more likely you might have the rope too long or too short. The correct balance varies with the number of bells. The more bells there are, the smaller fraction of the overall time is the handstroke gap. Always sort this out quickly, before you go into changes. If it persists for more than a few blows and you don't notice it, then

you're probably not listening properly.

Over or under sized dodges suggest that you treat a dodge as a discrete manoeuvre, separate from feeling the hunting speeds, whereas the up and down moves in a dodge should be at the same speeds as the same moves in hunting.

Drifting out of place is not so much a rhythm problem as a failure to listen and make small corrections to keep on track. Too long or short a rope can make drifting more likely.

An aid to developing rhythm

Learning to ring rhythmically requires a tidy handing and a steady, relaxed style. You need to focus on feeling the rhythm, and not let short term reactions disrupt your feel for it. One way to help do this is to practice ringing with a simulator – with no ropes to follow, you have to rely on rhythm and listening. If you have a simulator that can show pictures of ropes on the screen, stand where you can't see the screen.

Start by ringing Rounds on six; you can work up to higher numbers later. Make yourself the Tenor, which almost everyone finds easiest at first. It doesn't matter which bell in the tower it is, nor whether you usually ring Tenors.

Many people adapt quite quickly, but if you have become hooked on seeing ropes, it can be harder to get used to. Once over that though, you might be surprised by how well you do.

When you ring changes, keep it simple – plain hunt or Plain Bob. Above all, remember to ring at different speeds hunting up and down. That's stating the obvious, but you would be surprised how many people don't move on the first change, or don't move enough. The bell needs to move exactly as in normal ringing, but you have to move it without ropes to prompt you – you know where you are going, so just go there! Also, don't forget to stop and change direction at the back and front, another common problem. Always try to think where you will be at the next blow, not where you were last.

On higher numbers, try Little Bob. It's easier to ring than Plain Bob, rhythmic, and shorter!

Ringling changes reasonably well with a simulator, shows that your basic rhythm is OK. Then you need to build your confidence, to rely on it during normal ringing, where the rhythm is less even. Surrounded by the other ropes, and using ropesight for 'navigation', checking any errors, etc, it is easy to revert to letting rope-following drive your timing, and override your rhythm and listening. Don't let this happen. Blend the different skills together, each making their proper contribution.

It's worth it

No one can implant the ability to ring rhythmically – you have to develop it yourself. Rhythm might seem intangible and difficult, compared with seeing and following ropes, but the more you work at it, the more natural it becomes. Rhythmic ringing really is worth striving for. If you can develop a rhythmic style, you will improve your striking, and your ringing will be more confident and relaxed. You will also be an asset to your band, because when things go wrong, you will be a steadying influence, rather than adding to the confusion.

Tail End

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