



Turning in the Tenor

I would like to be able to turn the Tenor in, but I don't know how to. Will I be strong enough to ring a heavy bell?

The phrase 'Tenor king' (and these days 'Tenor queen' as well) implies something special about people who ring the Tenor.

It isn't the mental skills involved. Many compositions (of even bell methods) are designed around the Tenor, so the Tenor is likely to spend more time ringing plain courses than the little bells. The conductor often rings the Tenor, but that is because most compositions are easier to call from the Tenor.

It is the physical aspects of the task for which Tenor ringers are admired (or admire themselves). The Tenor is the largest and therefore heaviest bell in the tower. It takes more effort and skill to move it around, especially when you realise that it has to be rung at the same speed, and move the same amount as the little bells when changing places.

Ringling a heavy bell (whether it is the Tenor or not) requires more strength than ringling a lighter bell. But strength alone is not enough, and trying to ring a heavy bell by brute force alone is rarely successful.

Ringling any bell well needs technique, but the heavier the bell, the more important it is. Ringling a heavy bell accurately requires:

Long strokes

The effect you have on the bell depends on the combination of how much force you apply, and how far the rope moves while you are applying it. Long steady pulls achieve more than short jerky ones. A heavy bell has a bigger wheel, so the rope moves a greater distance anyway. Adapt your style to take advantage of this with long smooth pulls.

Accurate pulling and checking

Pulling makes the bell rise (to hold up or ring more slowly). Checking makes it drop (to cut in or ring more quickly). When ringling normally, most of us do a bit of checking and a bit of pulling all the time. That does no particular harm on a light bell, since you have plenty of effort in reserve. But when ringling a heavy bell, you cannot afford to waste much effort. When pulling, you must do the minimum of checking and vice versa, or you will find you physically cannot make the bell do what you want it to.

Planning ahead

You should always be planning at least a blow ahead; you pull now to control the next blow. With a heavy bell you need to plan two blows ahead. Pulling or checking is most effective if you prepare the bell for it at the previous stroke. For example, when pulling the handstroke of a dodge down to get the bell up for the over blow at backstroke, you must not pull too hard, or you will not be able to check the backstroke to cut in again at the following handstroke.



Overheard

The scene is a Branch practice and Grandsire Doubles has been half heartedly called for. The speakers are: Tenor Ringer (TR) and Seasoned Conductor (SC).

SC (trying to be helpful): "We could ring Minor if people prefer".

TR (protesting): "I can't turn the Tenor in".

SC: "But it only weighs 8 cwt".

TR: "I know, but I don't know how to ring the Tenor and set a beat".

What can we learn from this conversation? Perhaps SC was stirring things up a bit, but let us focus on the question of turning in the Tenor.

Certainly if TR was unhappy to turn the Tenor in, it was proper to declare the fact, rather than say nothing and risk messing up the touch. But what was the basis of TR's concern? Our discussion above about Tenor ringling is mainly to do with (very) heavy bells. Is there something special about ringling the Tenor, even if it is not very heavy?

Ringling the Tenor is Different

In any ring, the Tenor is the heaviest bell, and therefore the one that will require most strength and/or technique to ring it at a particular speed. Bands tend to ring lighter rings of bells faster than they do heavy ones, and that increases the effort of ringling the Tenor somewhat. Also, whatever the weight, ringling the Tenor (or indeed any bell) to six will demand more effort than it will when ringling eight or more, because the changes of speed and time that you need to move it between adjacent places is bigger.

But there is another important difference between ringling different bells in a ring. The different bells have different natural swinging periods, with the bigger ones swinging more slowly. So to ring all the bells at the same speed, the lighter ones must rise higher than the heavy ones. This normally means that the light bells swing somewhat over the balance, and the back bells swing just up to, or perhaps not quite up to, the balance.

This has a significant impact on the technique you need to ring the back bells, particularly the Tenor. The light bells can be rung by swinging roughly the same height each time to get them over the balance, and then 'controlled' by varying the timing of each 'pull off'. This does not work if the bell is barely swinging up to the balance, even for a bell of modest weight.

To ring a bell, especially a heavy bell, at or below the balance, you need to exert much of the control by pulling more or less on the previous stroke to make the bell rise more or less as required. You can then apply fine tuning by checking slightly more or less as the bell rises. That means that as it rises, you need to feel whether it is ahead of, or behind what you intended. Many people find this skill takes longer to develop than sensing when to 'pull off' again with the bell safely over the balance.

In fact the technique of ringling a bell below the balance is a scaled down version of that needed to ring a very heavy bell. In this sense, ringling even a modest weight Tenor does require a distinct technique.

Anyone can acquire this technique, and extreme strength is not required. In fact, less strength is needed to ring the bell properly than to try to ring it further over the balance. Everyone should learn to ring the Tenor, as part of becoming an all-round ringer, and the earlier the better. After some practice with light Tenors, you will find you are then able to move on to heavier ones. In fact, you will probably find you can more easily ring bells of a weight that before you found too demanding.

Setting the beat

What about TR's other remark, about the Tenor 'setting the beat'?

In one sense, 'the Tenor sets the beat' means 'everyone else should ring at the speed which the Tenor ringer finds comfortable', so it is something the other ringers have to do! The Tenor ringer needs the confidence to find a comfortable speed and stick to it, rather than be bullied into changing to suit the others.

You need to find the right speed during the rounds before going into changes, but the time when the Tenor is most likely to find the speed uncomfortable is once the changes start. Being able to judge a good method ringling speed while still in rounds takes a bit of experience. Try to feel whether you are near to the balance. If you find you are expending a lot of effort keeping the bell in the right place during the rounds, then changes will almost certainly make it worse.

The other sense of 'setting a beat' is to ring rhythmically and to resist the temptation to jump around from blow to blow making jerky corrections. Everyone should be doing this, but the Tenor has most to lose by not doing so. Also, the greater inertia of the Tenor should make it easier to feel, and then hold, a steady rhythm, using the bell as a sort of 'flywheel'.

Someone watching the late J David Clark ring the Tenor at St Mary's Nottingham once remarked "He uses half his effort to ring the bell, and the other half to make it appear that he is not using any effort". We should all learn to apply our effort economically and effectively.

Tail End