

Solo Handbell Music Difficulty Levels

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The welcome increase in available solo handbell repertoire, along with the growing number of solo ringers, has created a need for assigning difficulty levels to solo handbell music. This will:

- help soloists select repertoire best suited for their skill and experience level
- help composers and publishers accurately rate the difficulty of new solos
- help teachers train soloists
- motivate soloists to advance their skills

The following system should be used only as a guide. Tempo, choreography, choice of techniques, and the experience level of the soloist will affect the difficulty of any music selected.

Comments for Composers, Publishers, and Editors

- Do not assume that a piece that is easy to read, or easy for a bell choir to play with one bell per hand, is easily played as a solo. Seek the input of an experienced handbell soloist.
- Tempo is very important in assigning level of difficulty.
- The difficulty of bell techniques, especially multiple bell techniques, depends on the size of the bell.
- Generally handchimes are more difficult for a soloist to play than handbells in the same range. Use of handchimes raises the difficulty rating by one level.
- Handbell tree works need to be considered as a separate category.
- Each difficulty level is described by multiple criteria, which differ somewhat from the criteria used for bell choir pieces.
- Difficulty levels are cumulative, with each skill or criterion applying to all the levels above it.
- A plus or minus may be added to any level designation.

The matrix appears on the next 4 pages.

Level	1 Beginner	2 Novice	3 Early intermediate	4 Intermediate	5 Advanced	6 Professional
Tempo and tempo changes	Lento, largo – steady tempo	Adagio – steady tempo	Andante – steady tempo; ritard	Moderato; accelerando; rubato	Allegro	Any
Length	2-4 minutes	2-4 minutes	4-6 minutes	6-8 minutes	8-10 minutes (individual piece, or multiple pieces performed as a set)	Any
Key signatures	F major G major	D major G minor E minor	C major Eb major A minor D minor F minor	Bb major B minor C minor	A major E major Ab major	Any
Key changes	None	1, without modulation	1, with modulation	2	3	4 or more
Meter	4/4	$\frac{3}{4}$, 2/4	6/8, 3/8, 4/2	Mixed $\frac{3}{4}$ and 6/8, 5/4	2/2, 9/8, 12/8, 6/4; mixed meters (2/4, $\frac{3}{4}$, 4/4)	Any
Note/rest values	Whole, half, quarter, eighth	Dotted quarter, dotted half	16 th , dotted eighth	Triplet	32 nd , triplet over 2 beats	
Rhythmic elements	Anacrusis - pickup-notes or upbeats	Simple use of ties	Syncopation - simple patterns such as eighth-quarter-eighth	Syncopation - more complex, using sixteenth notes and ties	Extended 16 th note or triplet patterns	
Dynamic levels	Mp, mf	P, f, crescendo, decrescendo	Pp and ff, accents; more variety in dynamic levels	Subito piano or subito forte; dynamic shifts not matched to accompaniment; accents off-beat	F on bells below G5; p on bells above C7; dynamics at odds with texture (e.g. p on 4 bell chord); irregular accents	
Choreography provided?	Yes, with explanations	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Bell range and intervals	C5-C7; mostly stepwise motion	C5-C7; intervals up to a third	C5-G7; intervals up to a fifth	G4-G7; intervals up to an octave	C4-C8	C4-C8

Duplicate bells required	None	None	1 or 2	3 or 4	5 or 6	Any within the range G4-G7
Solo/ensemble techniques	Displacement, presets, weaving (pivot)	Weaving, passing between hands	Floating keyboard			
Number of single bell techniques used (besides ring)	1	2	3	4	Any	
Preparation time for technique changes	Generous	Generous	Adequate	Adequate	Limited	Limited
Range for single bell techniques: Ring Mallet on table Mallet roll Pluck Tap-pluck Swing	C5-C7	C5-C7	C5-G7	G4-G7	G4-C8	C4-C8
Shake Ring-touch Gyro Vibrato	C6-C7	C6-C7	C6-G7	C5-G7	C5-C8	C5-C8
Singing bell	n/a	C5-G5	C5-C6	G4-C6	C4-C7	C4-C7
Martellato – extent	One note	One measure	2 measures	Phrase	Extended passage	
Range for multiple bell techniques: Shelley 4 in hand ring and knock	C6-C7	C6-C7	G5-G7	C5-G7	B4-C8	G4-C8

Combo ring Shelley plus and minus to secondary position Ring-hook-and- hang	n/a	C6-C7	C6-C7	G5-G7	G5-C8	
Alternate Shelley Traveling 4 in hand 4 in hand with consecutive bells in same hand	n/a	n/a	C6-C7	G5-G7	C5-C8	
Shelley plus and minus to primary position Interlocked six-in- hand Rolled chord	n/a	n/a	n/a	C6-G7	G5-G7	G5-C8
Reverse grips Cluster six in hand Traveling six in hand Interlocking setups on the fly	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	C6-G7	G5-G7
Ornaments	n/a	Trill in Shelley pair (C6-C7)	Trill with alternating hands (C6-G7) Grace notes	Trill with alternating hands (G5-G7)	Trill with alternating hands (G5-C8)	
Damping	Table, shoulder	Brush damp, hand damp	Finger damping of single bells or primary bells in a four-in-hand pair	Finger damping of secondary bell in a pair	6-in-hand, table land damp	All musically appropriate damping expected, regardless of difficulty

Accompaniment	Straightforward support for bell part, no unison lines	Bells play counterpoint	2 accompanying instruments (e.g. piano and cello)	Deceptive-sounding meter; unison lines; SATB; non-piano accompaniment (e.g. organ)	Multiple accompanying instruments	Orchestral
Other elements	Familiar tune associated with words in English to aid memorization	Tune associated with words in English	Tune without words or with non-English words; medley		Cadenza in bell and/or piano part	

Note: the following techniques are not recommended in solo ringing:

- Echo
- Thumb damp
- Lifts in combination with other techniques (martellato-lift, pluck-lift, mallet-lift), except at the end of a phrase or before a rest