In directing massed ringing at festivals, I've discovered some rehearsal suggestions for directors that assist in preparing your groups for festivals and massed ringing situations.

Often, directors fall into two groups; those that follow the instructions in the rehearsal notes explicitly (leaving us with inflexible groups that can only play the music at the exact metronome markings) or those that do not look at the notes at all!

These notes are to provide guidelines without being specific to any individual piece. These are concepts and ideas that you can apply to the music that we are ringing, as well as assisting you in preparing for other festivals and music at home.

TAKE TIME TO LOOK OVER THE SCORE

Usually, the composer gives us all the notes that we need. Each composer identifies dynamics, dynamic changes, special techniques, tempo markings, etc.

Most rehearsal notes are nothing more than reminders of things that the composer has already written in. Tempos are also subject to change depending on the acoustical environment. Nothing is cast in stone in a massed ringing event!

You, as director, should make notes in your score to remind your ringers of these locations, especially in the midst of problem or busy spots. These places often have the ringer so occupied to "get the notes" that the "music" is lost.

PRACTICE these spots, going to extremes - tempos mush faster and slower than marked, forte really loud, piano really soft, EVERYTHING martellato, or malleted, or thumb damped in the sections that you're rehearsing.
IDENTIFY TRANSITIONS

The big "hot spots" of any massed ringing event are TRANSITION SPOTS. These are identified as key signature changes, time signature changes, tempo transitions, or bell changes without key signature changes and PAGE TURNS!

Usually, these come in combination, especially on the higher levels of literature.

REHEARSE all these sections, backing up 4-5 measures and going through the transitions identified, no matter what happens :-) !! Each time, identify things that the ringers did well, and the specific expectation e. g. "Let’s work on the DYNAMICS now!" of the next repetition of the section.

PRACTICE BACKWARDS!

Start at the end of the composition and find an ending "section" and run that part until it is smooth. BACK UP and run another section, continuing through the section that you just completed. This gives the ringer a feeling of entering into sections that they are familiar with! Often, in the rush of preparation, the least prepared section of massed rung compositions is the end!

PLAY GAMES

During the rehearsal of the previously identified transitions, play "follow the director" and conduct [without speaking] accelerandi, rubati, dynamic changes, etc.

Encourage the ringers to evaluate their performance and repeat the "game", conducting other changes that are unpredictable. This is a technique to be used after the music is well on its way to completion. Another of the norms during massed ringing is the group [or several groups] that do not look at the director.

Work to identify "check-in" spots, that your ringers need to look up and mark them in some way that is meaningful to you [the ringer]
DISCUSS THE FORM OF THE COMPOSITION

Did you know that most of the handbell compositions are in ABA form? Publishers have discovered that we, as music consumers, like ABA! Even if the composition isn't ABA, discover how the piece is put together. Have the ringers identify similar measures and sections. They'll be identifying strategies and techniques that they can apply and transfer to other locations in the selection - or maybe into other compositions!

They'll also become aware of the challenges and musicianship that is demanded of others in the group at "the other end of the table". This will improve their musicianship!

EVALUATE TECHNIQUE

Eventually, even the best ringers become lazy and the kinesthetic [muscle] memory forgets what it feels like to ring correctly. Stand back and watch your ringers as the piece is progressing and insist on good circles when ringing, flexible but good posture, and clean and controlled stopped techniques properly executed. Videotape the group during rehearsals and allow them to see and evaluate themselves.

Copyright 1 January 2000 - Timothy H Waugh - All Rights Reserved