

Certification  
Course A Text

Change Ringing  
Handbells Come to America  
AGEHR History & Organization



by  
Martha Lynn Thompson

# CHANGE RINGING

## Music, Math, Sport

“The art of change ringing is peculiar to the English, and, like most English peculiarities, unintelligible to the rest of the world. To the musical Belgian, for example, it appears that the proper thing to do with a carefully tuned ring of bells is to play a tune upon it. By the English campanologist, the playing of tunes is considered to be a childish game, only fit for foreigners; the proper use of bells is to work out mathematical permutations and combinations.”

— Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors*

Although change ringing is done primarily in England, it is practiced and enjoyed in other countries, too. Change ringing doesn't produce melody or harmony, so it doesn't have a lot of *musical* significance. In Belgium and The Netherlands, carillons, the “singing towers,” could play tunes, but this didn't catch on in the British Isles. Instead, the English invented their own mathematical order or sequences of ringing their tower bells. This became known as *change ringing*.

Practicing in bell towers did have its disadvantages:

- The early morning or evening rehearsals disturbed the neighbors.
- The towers were cold, damp, and drafty.

These disadvantages led to the development of handbells so the ringers could practice their changes in a more comfortable setting without disturbing the village. These rehearsals were held in homes, churches, or even the local pub! Eventually it was discovered that handbells could be used to ring beautiful music, not just mathematical changes.

When the wheel and pulley method of ringing swinging tower bells was introduced in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the ringers rang *rounds*, – a descending major scale with the *treble* as the highest bell and the *tenor* as the lowest. That soon became tiresome and didn't challenge their thinking, so the English invented change ringing – a way of ringing bells in various mathematical patterns or orders. Each order/pattern/sequence is called a *change* or what mathematicians call a *permutation*. To prevent bells from coming back into rounds, hundreds of *methods* – each with its own name – have been invented by mathematicians.

Practicing with tower bells was a bit difficult for individuals, so “dumb bells” were invented. These wooden bells allowed ringers to practice their changes in silence, and in the process, to develop the strength necessary to ring the tower bells. Today, Worcester Cathedral in England has a Teaching Centre in the bell tower where ringers (individually or as a ringing band) can practice changes on 8 weighted wooden “dumb bells.”

All methods are governed by 5 rules:

1. The ringing always begins and ends with *rounds* – ringing the scale from highest to lowest bell.
2. Each bell must be played once, but not more than once, in each change.
3. From one change to the next, a bell can move no more than one position in its order of ringing. Therefore, from one change to the next, a bell will ring in one of these positions:
  - a. On the same beat
  - b. One beat earlier
  - c. One beat later
4. A change cannot be repeated. No two changes can be alike.
5. Each change is rung with a steady beat.

Change ringing can be done on any number of bells from 4 on up, but most handbell change ringing is done on 6 or 8 bells.

When change ringing is done in a tower, the bells are rung in one of two different *strokes*:

- the *handstroke*
- the *backstroke*

When changes are rung on handbells, two different strokes are used, representing the two tower bell strokes.

- Handstroke: the bell is rung upwards and backwards, similar to what Americans call “off the table ringing.”
- Backstroke, the bell is rung downward and forward, similar to the way most American groups ring.

Since the bells must ring in both directions—backward and forward—the restraining springs must be set with equal tension so the clappers strike evenly on both sides of the bell.

To determine how many changes are possible on a given number of bells, multiply all the numbers:

Three bells:  $3 \times 2 \times 1 = 6$  changes

Four bells:  $4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 24$  changes

Six bells:  $6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 720$  changes

It would take 38 years to play the 479,000,000 changes possible on 12 bells!

A *peal* is defined as the completion of at least 5040 changes.

A *touch* is anything less than a *peal*.

*Plain Hunt*, the basis of change ringing and the simplest method, is described in the following two charts.

Simple 6 Bell Change—Plain Hunt

		Simple 4 Bell Change Plain Hunt				
Rounds		1	2	3	4	Handstroke
Rounds		1	2	3	4	Backstroke
		2	1	4	3	Handstroke
		2	4	1	3	Backstroke
		4	2	3	1	
		4	3	2	1	Back Rounds
		3	4	1	2	
		3	1	4	2	
		1	3	2	4	
Rounds		1	2	3	4	

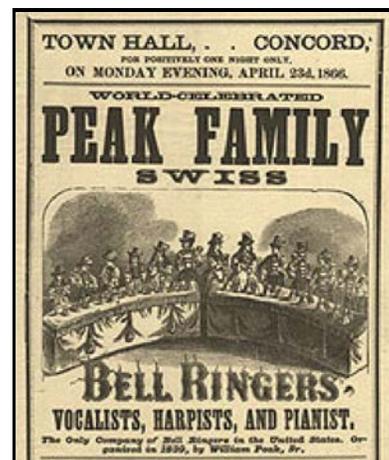
Rounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	Handstroke
Rounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	Backstroke
	2	1	4	3	6	5	Handstroke
	2	4	1	6	3	5	Backstroke
	4	2	6	1	5	3	
	4	6	2	5	1	3	
	6	4	5	2	3	1	
	6	5	4	3	2	1	Back Rounds
	5	6	3	4	1	2	
	5	3	6	1	4	2	
	3	5	1	6	2	4	
	3	1	5	2	6	4	
	1	3	2	5	4	6	
Rounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	

## HANDBELL RINGING COMES TO THE UNITED STATES

The Peak Family Ringers probably introduced handbell ringing in the United States in the 1830s. They are known to have given concerts in the eastern United States, and probably predated the Lancashire Ringers, which P.T. Barnum brought from England.

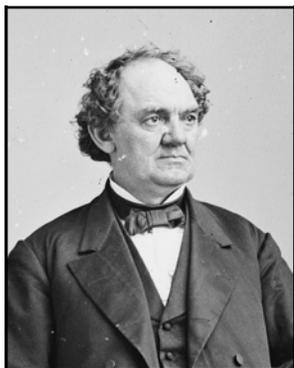
The following text accompanied the Peak Family concert flyer:

*Town Hall, Concord, for Positively One Night Only, on Monday Evening, April 23d, 1866. World-Celebrated Peak Family Swiss Bell Ringers, Vocalists, Harpists, and Pianist. The Only Company of Bell Ringers in the United States. Organized in 1839, by William Peak, Sr. ... 240 Silver Bells Manufactured expressly for, and imported from London by William Peak, Sr., in 1861, and the only two set Peal or Chime of Silver Bells ever manufactured - the largest weighing twelve pounds, and the smallest four ounces, a perfect Chromatic Scale, making the sweetest sounds conceivable; acknowledged by the entire press and public of the United States, Great Britain, France, Spain, West Indies, New Mexico, and wherever the Company have appeared, to be a most astonishing performance, and the Most Superior Corps of Bell Ringers in the World.*



According to an article published in the New York Times on February 22, 1885, Mr. and Mrs. William Peak were at that time, "inmates in the Cortland County Poorhouse near Homer, NY." Mrs. Peak stated that she and her husband had heard Barnum's Lancashire Ringers in Eastport, Maine, in about 1845. Mrs. Peak also said that the "Swiss people were anxious to return home, the climate having proved fatal to two of their number. Mr. Peak bought them out." "After three months' practice," said Mrs. Peak, "William Peak had made himself master of the bell ringing art and had also instructed the other members of our family. On our public appearance, triumph after triumph followed in quick succession."

Phineas T. Barnum was a circus owner, an entrepreneur, and a great showman. While in Liverpool, England, he heard a prize-winning, tune-ringing handbell "band" called the Lancashire Ringers and he arranged to bring them to the United State for a concert tour in the 1840s. Being a showman, he decided to dress them in Swiss Alpine costumes and call them "Swiss Bell Ringers." These Englishmen spoke nothing but English, so it was suggested that they not speak in public. However, Barnum said that if they spoke in their native Lancashire dialect, no one would know that they were speaking English! Because this group of "Swiss" ringers was so successful, Americans often mistakenly think that handbell ringing came to the United States from Switzerland instead of from England.



**P. T. Barnum**

In 1850, in the tower of Christ Church, Philadelphia, the Lancashire Ringers rang the first complete peal heard in the United States.



## MARGARET SHURCLIFF

In the late 19th century, most handbell ringing was done by vaudevillians, but in the early 20th century, Arthur Nichols introduced handbells to New England. They were used as practice bells by the tower bell ringers of the Old North Church in Boston. As a young woman, his daughter, Margaret, went with him to England to learn to ring tower bells so that they could reactivate the bells in the tower of Boston's Old North Church, the church of Paul Revere fame. Margaret became very good at change ringing and she was highly respected by men with whom she rang changes. In 1902, she became the first American woman to ring a peal on tower bells in England. When Margaret left England she was presented with a small set of Whitechapel handbells, the first of many handbells to come to the United States from England.



Margaret Shurcliff

In 1923, Margaret—daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Howard Nichols and now Mrs. Arthur Shurcliff—organized The Beacon Hill Ringers. This tune-ringing group included five of her six children plus several friends and was well known for ringing at Christmastime on Beacon Hill in Boston. She continued to introduce her friends to handbell ringing and handbells “bands” soon became popular throughout New England. Margaret, who shared her father's hobby of handbell ringing, was also an accomplished carpenter. Her husband, Arthur was the Chief Landscape Architect for the restoration and recreation of the gardens, landscape, and town planning of Colonial Williamsburg.

## AGEHR & HANDBELL MUSICIANS OF AMERICA HISTORY & ORGANIZATION

Established in 1954, the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers grew out of the previously established New England Guild of English Handbell Ringers. On October 1, 2011, AGEHR became Handbell Musicians of America. Its primary objectives are to educate, to promote the exchange of ideas relating to handbell and handchime ringing, and to sponsor educational activities. Our membership of approximately 5,000 includes mostly directors of handbell or handchime choirs. The Guild is divided into 12 two-to-five-state areas, which are further divided into individual state and district units. Members of the Handbell Musicians of America seek to carry out the motto, "Uniting People Through a Musical Art."



AGEHR Insignia

### New England Guild of English Handbell Ringers

The love and enthusiasm for handbells in America sprang from the hands of Margaret Shurcliff of Boston, Massachusetts. In 1902 she became the first American woman to ring a complete peal on tower bells in England. She also rang two peals on handbells, and she was presented with a set of eight Whitechapel English handbells, which she expanded.

The popularity of handbells spread rapidly through New England in the early 20th century, even though virtually all bells had to be imported from England. In 1937, several handbell enthusiasts met at Margaret's home and formed the New England Guild of English Handbell Ringers (NEGEHR), with Margaret serving as its first president. Members of NEGEHR exchanged music, ideas, and techniques. As far as meetings were concerned, the members would gather one evening each spring for supper, hold a business meeting, and then finish the night with a public concert.



Margaret Shurcliff

## First American Festival and the AGEHR



The first AGEHR Festival in Ipswich, MA.

By the early 1950s, handbell ringing was scattered across the United States. In February 1954, NEGEHR met at Margaret's home to plan the first American handbell festival, designed for the purpose of "spreading new ideas and exchanging music, techniques, and information." The American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR) was formed at the same time. In June 1954, the newly formed guild elected officers, set dues, and planned the first festival. A board of nine directors was chosen to work with the appointed officers. In 1955 Margaret was quoted as saying, "While handbell ringing in England is on the wane, we are just beginning to grasp the possibilities here."

The AGEHR held its first festival at the Crane Mansion on Castle Hill in Ipswich, Massachusetts. Despite having difficulty recruiting twenty-six participants, the minimum number required by the Mansion for a meeting, 700 to 800 people turned out for a Saturday evening concert. This number far exceeded the anticipated 300 people for whom chairs were set up.

Margaret resigned from the presidency in 1957 because of poor health and passed away on February 28, 1959. The roots of the AGEHR, however, were firmly planted, and the growth of the organization continued to surge ahead as Bessie Erb took over the presidency. Not until Robert Hieber took office in 1959 did officers begin to realize that the small family-like group had grown into a national organization. The board of directors proceeded to divide the AGEHR geographically from two to nine areas. In 1971, at the Morehead Festival, the AGEHR was further divided into twelve areas.

The art of handbell ringing expanded rapidly in western states, and in 1961 the first western festival was held in St. Louis. By 1977, it became necessary to hold four national festivals to accommodate a total registration of 4,000 people.

### THE AGEHR INSIGNIA

This official insignia of the AGEHR was made from a photograph of a real hand holding a real handbell. The hand is that of Margaret Shurcliff, founder and first president of AGEHR. The concentric circles in the design suggest the reverberations or overtones produced when a handbell is rung.



The official Guild colors—blue and gold—were used when the insignia was reproduced in color:

- Blue: circles, lettering
- Gold: bell casting and hand
- Brown: handle of bell
- White: background

## Mission

Handbell Musicians of America is dedicated to advancing the musical art of handbell/handchime ringing through education, community and communication.

## Vision

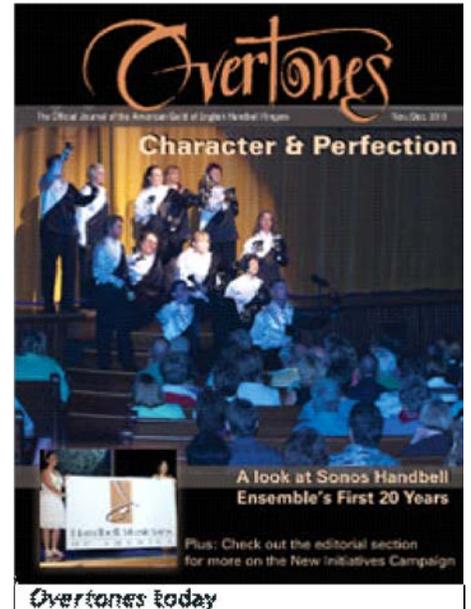
Uniting people to create a diverse community in which handbell musicians of every skill level realize their full potential through a musically-respected art form.

## Overtones Magazine and Other Publications



*Overtones*, the official journal of the Guild, first appeared in 1955 to create a bond of fellowship with ringers throughout the membership, to carry messages of interest, and promote the exchange of ideas and methods among members. The first issue of *Overtones* was a one-sided, four-page publication of typewritten material.

From 1961 to 1963, dramatic changes were seen in the appearance of *Overtones*, as it began taking steps toward becoming a full-fledged general interest magazine. The journal was published four times a year until 1970, when it became a bi-monthly publication. Today it is a 48-page magazine with extensive educational articles, photos, advertisements, and graphic work.



## AGEHR PUBLISHING

AGEHR is also a regular publisher of handbell music by the best established and rising composers as well as many resource books covering ringing techniques, conducting skills, and education.

This arm of the Guild is responsible for the following types of publications:

- Handbell and handchime music
- Resource books
- Educational materials



## E-Newsletters

Handbell Musicians of America also publishes a variety of emailed newsletters for its members and other interested parties. There are two national e-newsletters as well as several Area newsletters sent by the national office on behalf of the Area.

**E-Notes** is sent each month around the 15<sup>th</sup> and provides news and updates about happenings in the national organization. It also includes programs notes on AGEHR Music publications and a monthly Membership Reward discount offer.

**Event Notes** is sent each month around the 1<sup>st</sup> and includes a list of events, concerts and other handbell happenings around the Guild. Members can submit items for inclusion in the newsletter.

**Area Newsletters** are sent periodically each month and provide information about what's happening on a regional and local level.

**Member Notes** is a new option added in 2015. It is sent only to members and includes educational information on a specific topic from a guest expert writer. It will be sent bi-monthly.



## National Office

The first employee of the AGEHR was Mrs. Carl Heath Kopf of Meridian Hill Ringers in Washington, D.C. She was hired as a part-time corresponding secretary in 1962 for \$100. On October 1, 1981, the national office was established in Dayton, Ohio. Andy Flanagan served as executive director, Helen Flanagan as the *Overtones* editor and Jeanette Finkam as the administrative assistant.

In 2014, the physical national office was closed and all staff began telecommuting. The “national office” still exists, but in a virtual environment utilizing the latest in Internet technology and services to operate efficiently.

## AGEHR Becomes Handbell Musicians of America

At its 2010 Pinnacle event in Nashville, Tennessee, the AGEHR board of directors unveiled a plan consisting of three bold, new initiatives, designed to bring the art of handbell ringing into the modern era.

The first of these was a major technology investment designed from the ground up to allow for a web-based solution to connect musicians, directors, and educators in a social networking environment and to allow online management of events and member benefits.

Next was a rebranding and new identity. While keeping the proud tradition of AGEHR, in 2011 the Guild began doing business as the Handbell Musicians of America, a name identifying the organization's members as musicians to be respected and taken seriously in the mainstream music world.

Finally, by late 2012, a restructuring of membership options was completed and new on-line handbell musician resources were developed targeting specific areas of interest from within the handbell community including handbells in worship, education and the community.



Handbell Musicians  
O F A M E R I C A

Instead of holding a meeting once a year, the Guild now provides numerous opportunities to gather and learn new techniques. Scores of festivals, seminars, master classes, and workshops are held at the national, area, state, and district levels throughout the year.

Additional services — such as the Grant Fund, Handbell Musician Certification, specialty newsletters, and support for special interest groups — appear almost every year. Members also have the opportunity to give back to the handbell world by serving on committees and boards, writing articles for Handbell Musicians of America publications and teaching classes. The Handbell Industry Council, which represents manufacturers, publishers, and retailers, keeps members in touch with companies and businesses that cater to the handbell industry.

AGEHR has grown into a vibrant organization since its founding year and is looking forward to continued development of programs that service members

The 1955 *Overtones* listed forty-six charter members of AGEHR. Today the Handbell Musicians of America provides benefits and services to approximately 5,000 members, both national and international. Dating back to the first festival at the Crane Mansion, the Guild has provided members with quality services. Today these services far exceed what Margaret Shurcliff could ever have imagined.

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Handbell Musicians of America board of directors operates under John Carver's Policy Governance© model, and consists of a president, president-elect, and five at-large members. Each member serves the board for a total of six years. Elections occur every three years so that member terms are rotated.

### 2014-2017 Board

President—Ed Rollins  
President Elect—P. L. Grove  
Derek Nance  
Stephanie Rhodes  
Stephen Shorney  
Jennifer Vangolen  
Jessica Westgard

\*\*\*\*\*

Jennifer A. Cauhorn, Executive Director

## HANDBELL INDUSTRY COUNCIL

The Handbell Industry Council (HIC) was organized in August 1984, and is the official liaison between the members of AGEHR and those firms and individuals who have a business interested in the manufacturing of handbells and/or handchimes, handbell music publishers, distributors and dealers, and those businesses supplying materials and services related to handbell and/or handchimes.

The primary objectives of HIC are to serve as the communications vehicle between AGEHR and the business community and among companies with handbell interests, to develop, promote, and manage all commercial displays at national AGEHR events as defined in the AGEHR/HIC Partnership Agreement, to develop additional ways for AGEHR and HIC to more effectively serve handbell ringers and directors, and to serve in an advisory capacity to the AGEHR Executive Director and to AGEHR Area Boards when requested.

## HONORARY LIFE MEMBERSHIP

The Honorary Life Membership is an award intended to recognize and honor a lifetime commitment to handbells, based on exceptional service to the Guild and to handbell ringing in general. It is reserved for individuals of the highest caliber who have made outstanding contributions to the art of handbell ringing.

Membership is limited to 20 living members with one or two members selected every three years.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR GIVING

**AGEHR Grant Fund (formerly Endowment Fund)** has been established to help AGEHR provide resources with which to further their goals of educating directors and ringers, and helping them to realize their full potential. The AGEHR Endowment Fund is a charitable organization whose objective is to encourage innovation and support creative projects.

**AGEHR Legacy Society**—Membership in The American Guild of English Handbell Ringer's Legacy Society is open to anyone making a commitment of support for the Guild through his or her will, life insurance policy or other planned giving method.

**Heritage Fund**— In 2013, the national board of directors established the Heritage Fund to provide a secure base of financial support for the future of the Guild. The initial fundraising goal for this fund is 1.3 million which will provide an estimated annual investment income of \$60,000 to support Guild operations and new projects.

## SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS

**W. D. McKeehan Scholarship Fund** provides scholarship assistance to qualified individuals for participation in AGEHR's National Seminar.

**William H. Griffin Scholarship Fund** provides assistance to qualified individuals for participation in the annual Distinctly Bronze event.

**D. Linda McKechnie Scholarship Fund** provides assistance to individuals and programs that promote education in elementary schools or to special needs populations. The assistance may be in the form of a scholarship to National Seminar for an individual working in one of these areas or in the form of a grant supporting programming in one of these areas.

**Marilyn Kielnarz Scholarship Fund** awards a memorial scholarship to a music educator for each year's National Seminar.

**Anonymous Education Fund** was established by an anonymous donor as a challenge to other AGEHR members to contribute and support handbells in education and AGEHR educational events.

**Donald E. Allured Original Composition Award** is for the sole purpose of creating original compositions of handbell music that exemplify the highest standards, quality, and expectations that Don Allured would demand.

**David R. Davidson Composition Fund** supports the commissioning of new, original handbell works for advanced ringing ensembles.

**Deb Heine Young Ringer Scholarship Fund** supports scholarships for young ringers to attend national events, and was created in August, 2010, to honor and memorialize long-time member and National Seminar event chair, Deborah Heine.

**PAST PRESIDENTS**

Margaret Shurcliff .....	1945-1957
Bessie Erb .....	1957-1959
Dr. Robert Hieber .....	1959-1963
Dr. Marvin Reecher .....	1963-1976
Richard W. Litterst .....	1967-1971
Robert Ivey .....	1971-1973
Donald E. Allured .....	1973-1975
Nancy Poore Tufts .....	1975-1977
James V. Salzwedel .....	1977-1979
Mary G. McCleary .....	1970-1981
David R. Davidson .....	1981-1983
Mary V. Kettelhut .....	1983-1985
William H. Griffin .....	1985-1987
D. Linda McKechnie .....	1987-1989
Richard Coulter .....	1989-1991
Marilyn W. Hines .....	1991-1993
Jacques M. Kearns .....	1993-1995
Ginny Fleming .....	1995-1997
Michael R. Keller .....	1997-1999
Karen Leonard .....	1999-2002
Beth Watson .....	2002-2005
Deborah Rice .....	2005-2008
John R. Pfeiffer .....	2008-2011
Lee Afdahl .....	2011-2014

**HONORARY LIFE MEMBERS**

1963	Frederick Sharpe*
1965	Bessie Erb*, Helen Runkle*
1967	Dr. Robert Hieber*, Dr. Marvin Reecher*
1974	Richard Litterst*
1978	Elizabeth Bradford*, Dr. Ellen Jane Lorenz*
1980	Willard Markey*
1982	Donald E. Allured*
1984	Mary G. McCleary, W. D. McKeehan*
1986	Robert A. Ivey, Betty G. Garee*
1988	Mary V. Kettelhut*, Ronald Schink*
1990	Andrew L. Flanagan*, James V. Salzwedel
1992	Dr. Everett Jay Hilty*
1994	Jacob Malta*, Larry Fink*
1996	David R. Davidson*, Dr. Doris Watson
1998	Jacques Kearns* Margaret Shurcliff (Posthumous)*
2001	Michael R. Keller, Martha Lynn Thompson
2003	Ginny Fleming, Marilyn Hines
2005	Dr. William Payn
2008	William H. Griffin, Karen Leonard
2011	D. Linda McKechnie, David Weck
2014	Deborah Rice, Valerie Stephenson

\* Deceased

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS**

Andrew L. Flanagan -----	1981-1989
Victor Kostenko -----	1989-2001
William Griffin, Interim -----	2001-2002
Jane Mary Tenhover -----	2002-2006
Jennifer A. Cauhorn -----	2006 – Present

## REFERENCE MATERIALS

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## CHANGE RINGING

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## HANDBELLS COME TO THE UNITED STATES

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## AGEHR HISTORY and ORGANIZATION

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