

The Challenge of Selecting Ringers

Auditions for Community Groups

by Janet Van Valey



a resource for members of
Handbell Musicians
OF AMERICA

The Challenge of Selecting Ringers - Auditions for Community Groups

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
It's Audition Time	2
Decisions to be Made	3
The Audition	4
Possible components of an audition	4
How to assess ringing skill	4
Making the Final Decision	5
Notifying all candidates of the results	5
What Do Others Groups Do?	6
Policies	8
Membership	8
Selection of Members	8
Members in Good Standing	9
Process	10
Drills Used for Auditions	10
Ensemble Drills	10
Technique Drills	11
Challenge Rhythm Drills	11



Throughout our interactive e-books, click on links in the sidebar to find more online, download supplemental documents, watch videos, contact the author, and more.

Introduction

Before community choirs select new ringers, it is advisable to establish clear goals and expectations for both the organization and the individual ringers. As the saying goes, “If you don’t know where you are going, you won’t know when you get there.” Prospective ringers want to know what an organization stands for before they are willing to commit their time and energies. Likewise, unless the organization has a clear vision, the ringers (whether new or returning) cannot be expected to work together towards an undefined end.

New choirs have the chance to begin fresh, set goals, establish a clear vision for the group, and express this vision to potential members. Existing choirs may have a more difficult goal-setting journey, if this has not been their practice. The governance policies of the organization should provide a framework that supports group decision-making. Without that in place, the organization may need to restart and develop the governance structure needed.

Before starting the audition process, be sure the organization has:

1. Established goals, both long term and short term
2. Established operational procedures and policies

It’s Audition Time

“As musicians, and as people who sell material for people to hear and absorb, it’s important that we use that voice wisely.”—Roberta Flack

There is nothing a community choir does that has a larger impact on its

future than the selection of members. How the group plays, their musical skill, the personal interactions within the group, and their support of the whole group are all things that an audience can see and sense during a concert. If the goal is to build a strong music ensemble, then our selections must reflect that. Accepting a ringer just because they want to be in the group, or because they are available at that time, will often come back to impact the choir in a negative way. Leaving a position unfilled until you find the right candidate is often better than compromising.

Decisions to be Made

1. How are ringers selected?
 - a. Invitation
 - b. One time audition
 - c. Annual audition for all members
 - d. Other

2. Do ringers sign contracts?

3. Is an outside adjudicator used?

4. Who makes the final decision?
 - a. Director
 - b. Choir
 - c. Board
 - d. Other

5. When will auditions be held?
 - a. Time of year
 - b. One date or more
 - c. Other

6. How will candidates be recruited?
 - a. Personal contacts
 - b. Concert programs
 - c. Newspaper release

- d. Organization's newsletter
 - e. Organization's website
 - f. Mailing to area church handbell programs
 - g. An open rehearsal before auditions (invite potential candidates)
 - h. Other
7. What will be sent to candidates before the audition?
- a. Calendar for the coming season
 - b. Policies and procedures document for the group
 - c. Music to prepare in advance
 - d. Other

The Audition

Possible components of an audition

- Candidates complete a personal information sheet
- A small group, (e.g., officers/board/selected ringers) interviews each candidate privately
- During interviews, current ringers (even if re-auditioning) welcome potential members, taking time to get to know them
- If rhythm drills are used, candidates choose a position to ring
- If prepared music is used, candidates receive an assignment and music in advance
- Candidates sight read at least one title of music

How to assess ringing skill

This is always the challenge. No matter what approach is used, there often is a certain amount of intuitive decision-making involved. Approaches that are often used include:

- Rhythm drills
- Coordination drills
- Technique drills

- Sight reading
- Using a title prepared in advance

Making the Final Decision

Whoever makes the final decision, whether it is an individual or a group process, consider how you weigh the following factors. If you compromise, be sure you know what you are giving up. Give a percentage to each factor; it must add up to 100%. This can be very revealing, both about your candidate and your decision process.

- ____% Personality, evidence of teamwork
- ____% Ringing style
- ____% Handbell knowledge (techniques/terms, markings/ etc.)
- ____% Music-reading skill

Notifying all candidates of the results

All notifications of audition outcomes should be **in writing**.

It is vital that all who audition are acknowledged and properly informed of the outcome of their audition. When you have to say, “unfortunately I cannot offer you a position for this coming season,” try to also include some support for continuing their growth as a ringer. If they do not have a ringing home, offer to help connect them with a program they might join.

For those who are accepted, be sure their letter includes specific information, such as:

- Term of membership (one year, ongoing, etc.)
- Date of their first rehearsal
- Any requirements they need to fulfill before their first rehearsal
- Other

What Do Others Groups Do?

In an effort to share a wide variety of thoughts concerning auditions, a number of community choirs were surveyed concerning their approach to auditions. The groups were also encouraged to provide us with copies of policies, forms, and/or drills that they have found useful. This is an ongoing process, with more survey responses and audition materials being added as they are received.

Following is a compilation of the first wave of survey responses. This is intended to give you a glimpse of what others are doing and to provide you with information to work together, as a group, to decide what the best direction is for your organization.

1. How does your group select new ringers?

Half responded that they used annual auditions, and half held one-time auditions, not having current members re-audition.

2. If by invitation, what is the process?

Invitation is by director's choice.

3. If one-time auditions, who adjudicates the auditions?

The majority use the director and an outside judge to adjudicate.

3a. Who makes the final decisions?

The director makes the final decisions.

4. If annual auditions for everyone, who adjudicates the auditions?

Responses were evenly split between the director and an outside judge.

4a. Who makes the final decisions?

The director makes the final decisions.

5. If you use a process not listed, please share it.

Responses included a 3 year audition cycle or 2 year audition cycle.

6. If you do not audition for all positions each year, what is your process by which the choir can remove a ringer?

Responses included lack of attendance, breach of contract, board decision, and/or a proscribed procedure of probation.

7. Before the audition date, what do you provide the prospective ringers?

All responded that they provided the rules and procedures of the organization, most responded that they provide next season's (year) calendar, and some responded that they provide music to prepare in advance.

8. How do you test ringing skills and musicality?

All responded "sight reading music", most responded "rhythm drills", and some responded "playing prepared music." Responses for "Other" included "group ringing" and "a reference from another director."

9. How do you weigh the following? (Give each a percentage; the total should be 100%)

45% - Music-reading skill

22% - Handbell knowledge (techniques/terms/markings/etc.)

16% - Ringing style

16% - Personality, evidence of teamwork

10. Are there other criteria that are important?

- Teachable
- Willing to change style
- Willing to improve

Please download a copy of the survey on the previous page. All community-based groups are encouraged to complete the survey and add their voice and experience to this discussion.

Policies

As stated in the beginning, all groups need to establish their policies concerning auditions and any procedures dealing with removal of a ringer. The following policy statement is from one community choir and is presented as one example

The following is from the Kalamazoo Ringers' *Policies and Procedures Manual*

Membership

Selection of Members

1. Membership in The Kalamazoo Ringers is open to adult handbell ringers, by audition.
2. Open auditions will be held when positions are available.

3. The Music Director has the final vote concerning membership.
4. All incoming members will serve a one year probation period before earning full membership status
5. Members in good standing are not required to re-audition for a position in the choir.
6. In the spring of each season, members will be asked to sign a "letter of intent" indicating their plans to participate or leave the group in the following season.

Members in Good Standing

1. To retain membership in the Kalamazoo Ringers, a member must be in Good Standing.
2. Good Standing is determined by the Music Director who has the final authority, in consultation with the elected officers.
3. Good Standing will be based on four criteria
 - a. Musicianship, including, but not limited to:
 - i. awareness and sensitivity to musical lines, nuances, styles,
 - ii. music reading and retention skills
 - iii. rhythmic accuracy and consistent steady beat skills
 - iv. ability to effectively learn and retain music
 - b. Ringing Skills, including, but not limited to:
 - i. willingness and ability to maintain the desired ringing style
 - ii. willingness and ability to execute all special techniques in the manner requested
 - iii. ability to play with rhythmic accuracy and awareness
 - c. Attitude, including, but not limited to:
 - i. willingness to work as part of a team
 - ii. willingness to accept and implement directions

- d. Cooperation, including, but not limited to:
 - i. participating in all support work of the choir, such as set-up, clean-up, packing, polishing, fundraising, etc.
 - ii. bringing concerns or differences to the Music Director outside of rehearsal
 - iii. attendance is required at all rehearsals, with exceptions for occasional work conflicts and reason of health
4. A deficiency in one or more of the criteria may, at the discretion of the Music Director, result in the following process.

Process

1. When a member is not considered to be in Good Standing, the Music Director, with the option of including an officer, will privately discuss the problems with the ringer.
2. If it is mutually agreed that the problem can be resolved satisfactorily, there will be a trial period of up to 3 months. If the problem persists through the trial period, the Music Director will have the right to remove the ringer.
3. If a problem occurs following the trial period, the process will begin again.

Drills Used for Auditions

Following are three drills that I created for our choir's auditions. They have proved to be useful, challenging and very informative about individual ringer's skills and attitudes. Take liberties with tempo, dynamics, and techniques. Add or subtract any challenges that best fit your needs.

Ensemble Drills

The goal of these drills is to evaluate not only sight-reading skills, but also a ringer's sense of ensemble.



Download a copy of the Kalamazoo Ringers' Ensemble, Technique, and Challenge Rhythm drills used to audition new members.

Technique Drills

This is a good test of a ringer's knowledge of handbell markings, along with some insight into their coordination, technique, and flexibility.

Challenge Rhythm Drills

Watch how the ringers approach these drills. Do they jump right in, take time to look it over, talk through their mistakes, etc? Few people get them right the first time, but how does that affect their approach the second or third time?



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a resource for members of
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