

NOEL WE RING!

PERFORMANCE NOTES

by Douglas Mears

The Christmas carols in this collection are arranged for a quartet of handbell ringers holding two or three bells in each hand. They can, however, also be performed effectively by two-octave handbell or handchime choirs.

When played “four-in-hand” and “six-in-hand” by quartet, the use of bells tables is unnecessary. Each carol in this collection (except the “Christmas Suite” discussed below) has been arranged to eliminate the need for bell changes if performed by four ringers, each holding four to six bells. The visual effect of ringing in this manner is stunning, especially if performed from memory.

These carols are intended to be played mostly L.V. throughout. A minimum number of damping points has been indicated in the score at key changes and other places where harmonies shift suddenly. Other possibilities for damping are left to the discretion of the performers based on the type of ensemble, the acoustics, and the desired effect.

When holding two or three bells per hand, you may find it helpful to wear extra thick gloves or even two pairs of gloves. If the weight of the bells becomes unmanageable, and if you have a three-octave handbell set, it is possible to ring smaller bells by transposing the music up, usually a minor third. This makes it considerably easier, especially for the ringer of the lowest bells, who would then hold Bb, C, D, Eb, for example, instead of the heavier G, A, B, and C. In transposing bells, ringers simply ignore the fact that they are holding the higher, transposed bells, and read their music as if they are holding the original bells assigned.

The seventh movement, “A Christmas Suite,” repeats two of the previous arrangements in this collection, “Carol of the Bells” and “Noël Nouvelet,” and includes two new carols, “Pat-a-pan” and “The Angels and the Shepherds.” When this medley is rung by a quartet, a minimum of two, two-octave handbell sets are required because the ringers must occasionally duplicate bell assignments. Several small tables next to each ringer are suggested to accommodate the indicated bell changes. Four-in-hand ringers should prepare by interlocking their bells in advance, so that when it is time to change, they can quickly set down one pair of bells and pick up another. It is suggested that measures 1 through 50 be played while processing. Measures 51 through 92, requiring occasional bell changes, are then played in place near the tables. If desired, measures 93 to the end can be performed as a recessional, with the final 2 measures repeated as needed.

If you have enough handbells and eight ringers are available, it can be effective to perform the first six carols in this collection in two quartets, with the second quartet doubling the first, either at the unison pitch or an octave higher.