

Adventures in 8-Bell Music: Doing More with Less - by Larry and Carla Sue

Why play 8-bell music?

Shortage of ringers: If you can't get a full group together for a performance or rehearsal, you can use 8-bell music for two, three, four or more people. If you have more than four people, some notes can be doubled an octave up or down, or on chimes – or add some percussion!

Shortage of space: 8-bell music can be very useful when you don't have room to set up a row of tables. A small group of people can gather around a couple of music stands, and fit in a much smaller performance space. There's no need to load a huge amount of equipment into a van or trailer; eight bells and a music stand can be transported very easily. We have two percussion tables of different sizes, and one of them will even fit into a suitcase – so we've found that we can travel on a plane to a performance venue, and everything we need for a concert will fit into one suitcase and a carry-on bag.

Shortage of bells or equipment: If you only own a small number of bells, 8-bell music could be the answer!

Shortage of rehearsal time: Accepted a last-minute Christmas booking? Need to put something together for church next Sunday? Find some simple eight-bell music, and a small group can learn a straightforward piece quickly.

As an extra challenge for a duo or small group of ringers: If your group has a couple of ringers who need an extra challenge, or who want to develop their 4-in-hand skills, eight-bell music can be a good way to help with this.

Just because! We've had fun finding out what's possible with just eight bells. It's been an interesting adventure, and we've learned a lot about arranging and performing... and improved our four-in-hand skills along the way!

Choosing your music

Just like full-choir handbell music, eight-bell music varies in its complexity and challenges. There are some basic things to consider when choosing your music:

Who's going to play it? Are your ringers experienced? Quick to learn new music? Comfortable with four-in-hand techniques, tricky rhythms?

How many people will play it? It may sound easier for four people to play an 8-bell piece than for two people to play it, but this is not always the case. Although many people find playing two bells easier than playing four, fast passages may be more difficult to play with four people than with two. Sixteenth notes, fast runs and grace notes can be more challenging when those notes are split between more than one or two ringers.

As an example - "Carol of the Drum" would be straightforward for a small group of ringers to play:

Musical notation for "Carol of the Drum" in G major, 4/4 time, tempo 120. The piece consists of 11 measures. The first six measures are marked *mp* and feature a melodic line with eighth notes and chords. The last five measures (7-11) feature a more complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes and chords, also marked *mp*. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The tempo is indicated as ♩ = 120. The piece is marked *mp* (mezzo-piano) throughout.

“Chinese Dance” would be more of a challenge for a group – although not impossible!

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Chinese Dance". It consists of two staves of music in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff starts at measure 17 and ends at measure 18, marked with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The second staff starts at measure 19 and ends at measure 20, marked with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together, and includes a trill (tr) in measure 19. There are also some rests and a fermata in measure 20. The score is written on a grand staff with a treble clef and a sharp sign.

How much rehearsal time do you have? Are you looking for a challenge that you can work on over a number of weeks or months, or do you need a piece that you can put together in a short amount of rehearsal time? Remember – a handbell piece doesn’t need to be difficult in order to be beautiful or meaningful to your audience. A simple piece played well can often be more effective than a tricky piece that you don’t have enough rehearsal time to master.

Bell allocation – who plays what?

Several options –

8 ringers with one bell each – unusual, but useful for new ringers or “have a go” sessions with children or elderly people

4 ringers, each with two bells

3 ringers – one 4-in-hand ringer, or two playing 3-in-hand, and the remaining ringer/s with two bells each

2 ringers, playing 4-in-hand

Assigning bells: When we play our 8-bell music as duets, we try to stick with the same bells for each piece, as far as possible. In pieces that use G5-G6, it’s straightforward for one person to play G5, A5, B5 and C6, and the other to play D6, E6, F6 and G6. If there are any accidentals, of course we’ll switch those in as necessary. A more interesting challenge comes when a piece doesn’t go from G5 to G6 in a straightforward way. In our arrangement of “Chloe’s Passion”, the lowest note is a D5, As the piece still only uses eight bells, that means one of the other “usual” notes won’t be used, so we’d assign the D5 in place of that missing note. In another example “The Butterfly”, there’s an A6 in the “bells used” chart. A quick look tells us that there’s no F6 – so the A6 is assigned in place of the F6. All the other bells are assigned in the usual way. You can find more information about this at www.larryandcarla.com. There are other ways to assign bells, of course, but we find that new pieces can be learned more quickly if we use the same method of assigning bells each time.

4-in-hand options

People sometimes notice that we don’t use the same style of 4-in-hand ringing. Larry uses **ring-and-knock**, which is the most commonly used method in the USA. He also plays his pairs of bells in thirds - G5 and B5 in one hand, and A5 and C6 in the other.

Carla uses **British-style** 4-in-hand, which can be a useful alternative to the usual ring-and-knock technique. Some people find it more comfortable, mainly because there is less pressure on the joints of the index and middle fingers, as the narrower part of the bell handle is between those fingers. There’s a lot more information about this style on our website: www.larryandcarla.com. Carla plays her bells in consecutive pairs - D6 and E6 in one hand, and F6 and G6 in the other.



Special considerations/challenges in 8-bell music

Damping: How much damping... is down to individual preference, but we've found that we prefer "sloppy damping" in our eight-bell music, letting the sound carry over slightly in passages where a legato sound is more important than giving each note its exact length. There's an instruction rarely seen in today's handbell scores: LVUHC (Let Vibrate Until Harmony Changes), which we find works well in many eight-bell pieces. We generally give priority to playing the next note before damping the previous one, and only stop the sound if unwanted dissonance is created (i.e. turn that bell off if it sounds wrong/horrible). We often choose to play through the rests in our music, unless the rests are obviously required, depending on the mood of the piece. Allowing the bells to continue sounding for more than the written note length creates a more legato effect, and gives a fuller sound to the music, as well as allowing us more freedom of movement. Be aware of when you really do need to damp, though – are the next few notes part of the same chord? If so, you might be okay with less damping. Does the chord, or the mood of the piece, change? If so, you might need to damp more precisely.

Finding the melody/accompaniment: In 8-bell music, there isn't always a clearly visible melody line or a distinct accompaniment line. The two tend to cross, resulting in many chords where not every note needs to be emphasized. It takes practice to pick out the melody/important notes in a passage, and to bring out the melody and hold back on the other notes. In this excerpt from "Kingsfold", the melody is in the lower notes, so the upper notes need to be treated as an accompaniment and played with sensitivity so as not to overpower the melody:

Musical notation for an excerpt from "Kingsfold". The notation is on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Measures 21-28 are shown. Measure 21 starts with a half rest followed by a quarter note G4. Measures 22-24 are marked with a *mf* dynamic and feature chords. Measures 25-28 continue with chords and some melodic movement. A hairpin crescendo is shown under measures 21-22.

The melody in "Whence is that Goodly Fragrance Flowing?" uses all eight notes, crossing with the accompaniment - creating more of a challenge for the ringers, who need to be aware of when they have the melody and when they don't:

Musical notation for an excerpt from "Whence is that Goodly Fragrance Flowing?". The notation is on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Measures 6-15 are shown. Measures 6-8 are marked with a *mp* dynamic. Red circles highlight specific notes in measures 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15, indicating where the melody and accompaniment cross.

Creating continuity of line is an important skill; listen to the ringer/s next to you, work together on dynamics, and be prepared to make adjustments "on the fly" if necessary, to create a seamless melodic line. This brings us to:

Balance: With 8-bell music, it quickly becomes obvious if some bells are quiet and others are loud. Check the bells to make sure they're adjusted correctly as a set... and then play your bells at the volume level that's required by the music. Don't be the one member of a duo or quartet whose bells are louder or quieter than everyone else's! If audience members closed their eyes, would they be able to hear that two or more people are performing the piece? Aim to play so musically that no one can hear where one musician's bell assignment ends and another's begins.

Match your movements: Playing handbells is a visual art. In a duo or small ensemble, it's a good idea to look like a member of a team. Make your movements match the mood of the piece, and keep your arm movements fluid; "ringing circles" is possible, even when you're playing 4-in-hand. Consider matching your movements with your neighbors'.

Where to play 8-bell music

8-bell music can be particularly useful for performances in any venue where space is at a premium. We've played duets for senior living communities and in care homes. We've given concerts in churches and for community groups. Eight-bell music is great for busking/street performances, although in some cities you'll need a permit before you can do this. The music works well for weddings, funerals and remembrance services, as well as traditional church services. We've used eight-bell music since 2012 for playing at the Salvation Army Red Kettle, in locations where there wouldn't be space for a full handbell choir. We've played in airports, for graduation ceremonies, for fundraising events, at a museum and a planetarium, and even at a university's blood drive!

Expanding to 12- and 16-bell music... or trying music for just 6 bells

When you're ready to expand, there are lots of 12 and 16-bell arrangements available too. We also have titles for just 6 bells (all with piano accompaniment) for even smaller groups! The same special considerations and challenges apply to 12- and 16-bell music too. You'll need to think about how to allocate the bells, what range of bells will best suit your group, and also to work on matching your movements and playing as an ensemble. When you're performing small-group music for a congregation or concert audience, there's nowhere to hide!

Where (and how) to buy music for small groups

There's a lot of music available from www.choraegus.com. We have over 200 titles in our catalog, ranging from "Surprisingly Easy" pieces to more challenging music. There are hymns, traditional and folk songs, classical pieces and Christmas music. Some of the titles are available in collections, which is a cost-effective way to buy a number of related pieces together. There is a demonstration video of every piece on the website, so you can listen before making your purchase.

Our music is designed to be purchased and downloaded – so you print it yourself instead of waiting for a hard copy to arrive in the mail – and you don't pay for shipping! Simply choose your music, add it to your shopping cart on the website, make your payment securely using PayPal, and you'll see a purchase confirmation page containing a download link for each piece you ordered. Click on the link/s within 120 hours to download your music, ready for printing. For eight-bell music, you are allowed to print the number of copies needed for your handbell ensemble, up to a maximum of four copies - so you don't need to pay separately for multiple copies of the same piece.

Choraegus isn't the only place to buy small-group music. Other sites to consider are www.grassymeadowmusic.com (mostly arrangements by Jason Krug), www.roundtreemusic.com (arrangements by Ben Roundtree), and www.sonologymusic.com. If you look at the Jeffers Handbell Supply website (www.handbellworld.com), you'll also find other arrangements for small groups.

We hope you'll decide to try some small-group music!
If you have any questions, you're always welcome to contact us, either on our website: www.choraegus.com, or by email: info@larryandcarla.com.

Choraegus

