

Trust Your Memory

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Why Memorize? – Memorizing music is not something most handbell ringers think of doing, unless they are a solo ringer. However, knowing how to memorize is a useful tool for all ringers, even if they only memorize short phrases of the music.

As a solo ringer this skill will help:

- Free you from struggling to see the sheet music while you move up and down the table.
- Allow you to focus on the choreography of the piece.
- Remove a barrier between you and your audience.
- Allow you to develop the feeling that the music is flowing out from you.

As a handbell choir member this skill will help you:

- Negotiate page turns successfully
- Look up at the conductor more often
- Look ahead in the music so you are prepared for special techniques and bell changes.
- Look and feel more confident when ringing.

Types of Memory – When we memorize music we use four different types of memory. Each individual has a certain type of memory that comes more naturally than the others. Or, if they are very fortunate, they have more than one type of memory that comes very naturally. However, as musicians our goal should be to have all of these types of memory work together. Let's examine these different types of memory and we will do some short exercises to isolate each one.

- **Tactile** – This is often referred to as muscle memory. This is the type of memory we develop when we repeat a passage of music over and over until we can play it by feel, without really having to think about what we are doing. Although for many this is a very natural type of memorizing, it can be unreliable when we become nervous or get distracted. However, this type of memory is essential when we are playing fast, technical passages especially when solo ringing.
- **Aural** – Musicians who are good at playing by ear rely a lot on aural memory. Singers also rely a lot on aural memory. All ringers rely to some extent on aural memory while playing, even when using the printed music. We remember how the piece sounds and we try to reproduce that sound. Using our ear when we are playing by memory is important and helpful, but it is not totally reliable on its own, especially in a handbell choir. When others make a mistake, our memory might get thrown off because the piece doesn't sound right. Or, if we miss one of our notes, it is hard for us to get back on track because we can no longer rely on our aural skills, nor our muscle memory.
- **Visual** – People who have an unusually strong visual memory are often described as possessing a "photographic memory." Seeing the music on the page in our mind's eye can greatly assist us when we are playing by memory. If we are playing in a choir, this type of memory can help us to look ahead in the music a measure or two so we can look up and watch the conductor, be prepared for bell changes and technique changes, and negotiate page turns. As a soloist our visual memory can help keep us on track as we play through an entire piece. We may be able to visualize which section we are playing in the music, or the markings we made in the music about displacing a bell, or the set up for a 4-in-hand passage. Our visual memory not only helps us visualize the sheet music but we can also visualize where our bells are on the table, or the order we play the bells in a complicated mallet or weaving passage.
- **Analytical** – This is the most reliable type of memory, but it is the hardest to develop for most handbell ringers. This type of memory involves studying the piece and analyzing it so we "know the score." To truly memorize a solo handbell piece, you need to spend some time away from the table reading through the score, analyzing it, and playing it with no bells in your hands. Analyzing the form of the piece, understanding whether notes are part of the melody or the accompaniment, recognizing patterns, studying the dynamics and other items notated in the score are examples of things we do that help our analytical memory. As a ringer in a handbell choir this is harder to work on, but it is helpful if you take time at rehearsal to look through the structure of the piece (hopefully your director explains this), look for repeated patterns and always know if you are part of the melody or the accompaniment.

Tips to Help You Memorize

For Solo Ringers:

- Start memorizing from the very first practice session with a piece.
- Try to get away from looking at the music as soon as possible. Pull off that band-aid!
- Spend time studying the score away from the bell tables.
- Memorize a section at a time.
- Repeat short phrases and passages while trying to look less and less at the music.
- Make sure you are using all your types of memory – repetition will develop tactile and aural memory, Studying the score will help develop visual and analytical memory.
- Away from the bell tables play through the piece in your head. Visualize and feel your hand movements. Sing your part. Sing the note names.
- Start with memorizing simpler, shorter solos.
- Practice with a recording of the accompaniment.
- Practice in front of a friend to test your memory before performing for a crowd.

For ringers in a handbell choir

- Ask your director if you can take your music home to study
- While the director is working with ringers in a different section of the choir, air bell a passage you want to memorize.
- Start by memorizing page turns and places where you need to watch the director more carefully, such as the first few measures of a piece or a measure where there is a tempo change.
- Force yourself to look up at the director more often!
- Use some of the tips above for solo ringers.

We will use some music examples to explore how we can better use our memory.

Space for Notes: