

HANDBELLS and HANDCHIMES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Handbell ringers all over the world are looking forward to start rehearsals as soon as possible. However, until a vaccine is developed, no gathering of people will be 100% safe. A vaccine usually takes many months, sometimes even years, to be created. So we need to learn to adapt to our new reality and implement measures that will decrease our chances of getting infected. Below you will find some suggestions you might apply in your handbell rehearsals to keep ringers safe.

These suggestions are based on what is currently known about the ways people get infected with the COVID-19 virus. The virus is spread mainly from person-to-person through respiratory droplets which are tiny saliva or mucus drops produced naturally when a person sneezes, coughs, talks, or sings. These droplets can travel small distances in the air (about up to 6 feet) and then land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs.

In addition, since the virus can live on different surfaces between several hours and several days (depending on the type of surface), people can become infected after touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own nose, mouth, or possibly their eyes. Scientists have measured the survival of the COVID-19 virus on plastics, stainless steel, cardboard, and copper. For other surfaces, estimates are based on what's known about the survival of other coronavirus, the family of viruses that includes COVID-19.

Safety measures should be even more strongly enforced in the fall and winter, when respiratory diseases usually peak. Below you will first find some general recommendations of actions to take before, during, and after rehearsals. Then there are more specific suggestions regarding our handbell equipment.

Rehearsals

- Before rehearsals
 - Evaluate if your rehearsals can be done with fewer ringers present. Some options for this might be:
 - Instead of full choir music, maybe practice several ensembles.
 - Do sectionals, i.e., practice treble bells separately from bass bells.
 - Change the practice venue to one with more space.
 - Depending on the weather, maybe practice outdoors.
 - Many choirs include persons at higher risk of severe illness and death, if infected. To protect these and other ringers, there are several actions you can take:
 - Actively monitor where COVID-19 is circulating, particularly in your community.
 - Encourage ringers not to come to rehearsal if they have any symptoms or feel unwell.
 - Monitor for fever before a person enters the rehearsal space (have a thermometer available for this). Make sure no person with the disease is allowed in the rehearsal.
 - Encourage ringers to take their own temperature at home and not to come to rehearsal if they have a fever.

- Do not allow anyone without a mask into the rehearsal space.
 - Advise all ringers that most of the persons transmitting the disease do not show symptoms, so they should behave as if they are infected and if their fellow ringers are infected too.
 - Encourage all ringers to get tested before starting rehearsals.
- During rehearsals
 - Maintain a distance of 6 feet or more between ringers to minimize the contact with respiratory droplets. If possible, assign only one ringer per table.
 - Everybody present at a rehearsal should wear masks at all times. Ensure that face masks are available for those who do not have one.
 - Ringers should wear gloves at all times. This will decrease the chance that ringers contaminate their hands if they touch an infected surface. They will also notice if they try to touch their faces.
 - Decrease as much possible the use of techniques that require touching the bronze area of the bell, such as thumb damps and plucks, unless the metal can be disinfected before and after each rehearsal.
 - Discourage changing positions between pieces.
 - If possible, select music that does not have bell sharing within the song, unless you have an extra set of bells you can use. Between pieces, make sure to disinfect the handle of bells to be used by other ringers.
 - Have ringers wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after rehearsals. If soap is not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Have soap or sanitizers available.
 - Encourage ringers to cover their faces with their elbow or with a tissue if they sneeze or cough. Supply tissues and closed bins for disposal of used tissues.
- After rehearsals
 - Disinfect all equipment and other surfaces.
 - Put the gloves in a plastic bag, take them home, and wash them.
 - If someone at the rehearsal is later identified as a suspected COVID-19 case, the Director/Conductor should inform all ringers. They should all quarantine themselves for 14 days before rejoining the rehearsals.
 - Once home, discard or disinfect the masks.

Music scores

It is estimated that the virus can survive on paper for up to 30 minutes, but it might be longer. Although some types of coronavirus survive for only a few minutes on paper, others can live for up to 5 days.

- If possible, each ringer should have his or her own music binder and not share music. If the binder stays in the practice room, disinfect the covers before and after each rehearsal.
- If music needs to be shared, an option is to put the pages inside plastic sheets that can be disinfected after rehearsal. Whether or not you use plastic sheets, ringers should wear gloves any time they touch the pages.

Handbells / Handchimes

The COVID-19 virus can survive on copper up to 4 hours and up to 3 days on plastics. Other coronavirus viruses can survive 2 to 8 hours in aluminum (some bass bells and handchimes are aluminum) and up to 5 days in other metals.

- Disinfect the bells/handchimes before and after each rehearsal.
- Ringers should wear gloves any time they touch the bells or handchimes.
- Make sure to disinfect the plastic bell handles before and after each rehearsal. Shared bells should be disinfected between songs. If your bells have leather handles, make sure you use the wipes specifically made for cleaning leather.
- If the clapper head is covered with felt, decrease as much possible the use of techniques that require touching it, such as plucks, as it is not easy to disinfect.
- Try not to use different clapper head settings to avoid contaminating the clapper head. Adjust the effort used in ringing to change dynamics, instead.

Pad covers

Some types of coronavirus survive in cloth for up to a day.

- Use covers that can be washed after each rehearsal, like fitted bed sheets or dining room table covers. You could also use disposable plastic covers (the ones used for birthday parties).

Additional music equipment and risers

As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 virus can survive up to 3 days on plastics, such as the mallets of handle, some risers, and the grip of singing bell sticks. In addition, coronavirus can survive in wood (singing bell stick) for 1-4 days.

- Mallets: Avoid touching the yarn in the mallets, as it is not easy to disinfect. Disinfect the plastic handles before and after each rehearsal.
- Singing bell stick: Disinfect the whole stick before and after each rehearsal.
- Risers: Disinfect before and after each rehearsal.



Dr. Linnette Rodríguez-Figueroa has a Bachelor's degree in Biology and a Master's degree in Epidemiology, both from the University of Puerto Rico. She also has a Doctor of Philosophy in Epidemiological Science degree from the University of Michigan. She is currently a Professor at the Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology of the University of Puerto Rico, Graduate School of Public Health, where she is also the Coordinator of the Epidemiology Academic Programs (MPH and MS). Dr. Rodríguez has been an avid handbell ringer for over 30 years. She has played handbells in over 20 countries, and has participated in local handbell festivals in Puerto Rico, in regional and national festivals in the US, in European

festivals, and in every International Symposium since 2004. Some of her most cherished handbell memories include helping establish in 2014 the first handbell group in the city of Tjvín, Russia, being selected to play with the US All Stars Choir at the 2012 International Symposium, and ringing bells on the Carnegie Hall stage (December 2019).

