



It's music Jim, but not as we know it

Nigel and Jane Mellor have sung in the choir since 1987, before that John Harrison sang from 1967 to 1987, and more recently Kristin Fitch joined. What do they have in common – they are all bellringers at All Saints Church. In fact there is a strong crossover between ringing and singing, though they are very different forms of music – hence the misquote from Star Trek at the head of this article.

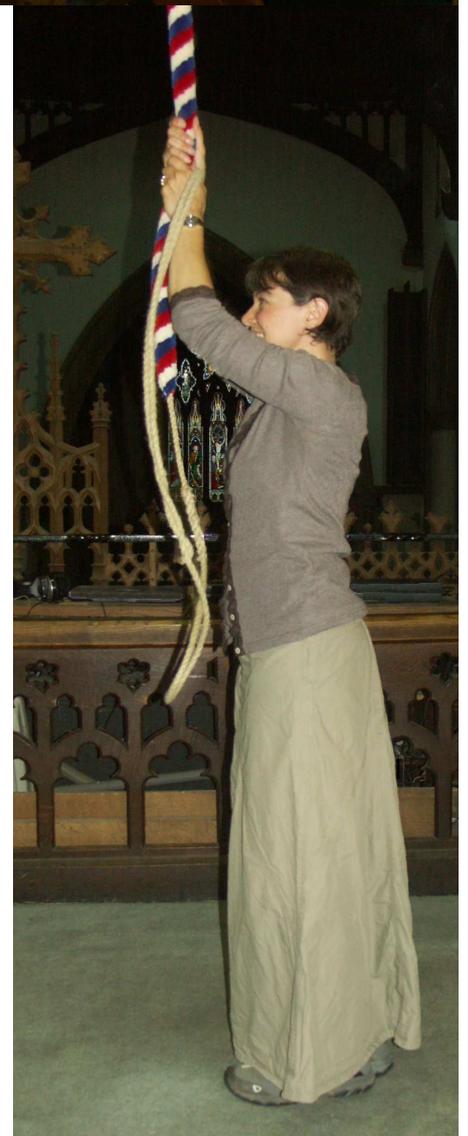
Can you imagine an instrument whose moving parts weigh a ton or so, with a delay of over a second between your action and its sound? Can you imagine playing an ensemble of such instruments to a precision of a few hundredths of a second? Can you imagine a form of music constrained to play every note before repeating any of them, and composing a piece to last several hours in which no bar must be the same as any other? And can you imagine performing such a piece without any music? If you can, then you begin to get a feel for change ringing on tower bells.

Both the style of ringing and the way of hanging the bells that makes it practical evolved in England over 400 years ago. English style ringing has spread around the world (the fastest growth in both bells and ringers is currently in Australia) but England still has nearly 95% of ringing towers.

Bells swing full circle, mouth up to mouth up, and they sound once on each revolution, typically every two seconds. Synchronising them accurately to perform musical sequences requires only moderate effort (skilfully applied) but the physics limits the variation in timing to small changes – so no runs of quavers. Every bell sounds once before any sounds again, and no bell moves more than one place at a time in the sequence. That seemingly awkward constraint provides the crucial coherence between successive sequences, so the sound lies between the extremes of being completely predictable or completely random, which is the essence of music.

Ringling is a fascinating activity that uses a unique blend of physical and mental skills. It provides intellectual stimulation, modest physical activity and social contact. Ringers can enjoy being part of a worldwide community of ready made friends who share their hobby.

There's more about the music of ringing in a series of articles published in Making Music South Eastern Region newsletter in 2008, at: jaharrison.me.uk/Ringing/Music/ and more about what makes ringing special at: jaharrison.me.uk/New/Articles/AspectsRinging.pdf. If you would like to visit the tower, have a talk on ringing, or having a go please contact Jane Mellor on 0118 979 2037 or jane@mellorfamily.com



Kristin Fitch ringing

John Harrison (chairman 1968-74)