

## Thinking the unthinkable – 2

### Performance and quality

At its core, ringing is a skilled, performance-based activity. Many extra layers can add a richer experience to that – art, science, heritage and social friendship – but underneath it all, a ringer is a performer. That fact seems to get lost in much discussion and thinking about ringing, and it seems to have been squeezed out of popular ringing culture.

Most performers practise in private and perform in public. They practise what they are going to perform in order to perform to an acceptable standard. In contrast, most ringers practise in public, with little thought for their involuntary audience, and many of them seem not to consider the standard of their performance. An observer of much ringing in progress might find it hard to tell apart practices from performances in terms of what is rung, how well it is rung, or the apparent motivation for ringing it. Some ringers are distinctly uncomfortable when taking part in a poor performance, but many appear not to notice.

Ringers don't compare well with other church musicians. Choristers are expected to sing the right tune in the correct rhythm. Humble village choirs may not achieve the immaculate sounds heard in our cathedrals, but even they generally get most of the right notes on most of the right beats. Ringers don't need to pitch notes, they only have to get the timing right. The quality of striking produced by elite bands is on a par with the best cathedral singing, but that is not true at the other end of the spectrum. Whereas a third rate choir will occasionally hit wrong notes, a third rate band of ringers will rarely strike a clean row, and the performance of even second rate bands often leaves much to be desired.

Poor striking is so endemic that there must be many ringers who have never heard good striking, let alone taken part in any. But to say this openly is taboo in many ringing circles. Some readers will no doubt argue that the paragraph above is unduly harsh, that many bands are struggling, that they are doing their best, and that belittling their effort might make them give up altogether. That misses the point. If striking is bad it is bad, and pretending otherwise won't help to improve it. If a church organist played several wrong notes in every line of every hymn, we might want him to give up, or at least to take lessons to try to improve. But for some strange reason we don't apply the same logic to ringers. Any standard, however poor, is considered acceptable. This is not a new problem, but it may be becoming worse.

### Why?

Why should so much ringing be so poor? Ringing tower bells is not an easy art – trying to swing half a ton of metal to a precision of a tiny fraction of a second would seem impossible to the layman – but it is well within the reach of people of ordinary ability if they develop the right skills, and exploit the rhythmic nature of the process. The proof is that many bands of quite ordinary people do manage to turn out decent ringing, some of them routinely achieving high quality performance. Good ringing doesn't require super human skills, so why is it not more common?

One answer is inadequate training. The best ringing training is good but the general standard could be improved in many ways. Training could be more structured than it often is. More care could be taken to avoid the formation of habits that impair performance. Active and effective follow-up coaching could be provided more routinely. We could use intensive training more. We could be better at sharing best practice, with trainers learning from each other. We could learn from trainers in other activities that require skilful co-ordinated actions, like canoeing, or gymnastics for example.

But poor training isn't the whole story because some people survive poor training to become very good ringers. They develop their own skills by emulation and experiment, guided by what seems to work for them. Undoubtedly they were lucky in their innate ability and in the opportunities that came their way, and they must have had good examples to follow – hearing good ringing and seeing people ring well. Above all, they must have had the motivation to want to improve their performance, something that we seem not to inspire in many ringers.

### Motivation

Motivation marks out people who achieve in any activity. So what motivates someone to make progress and excel in ringing, rather than drifting, or dropping it in favour of a more rewarding activity? We hear a lot about the need to be friendly to recruits, and the need to make ringing 'fun'. But there are many ways to get friendliness and fun outside of ringing. Why would someone want to get fun and friendship from ringing in preference to the myriad alternative ways of getting it?

The only thing ringing offers that other activities can't, is the ringing itself. That's stating the obvious, but it is critical. If you get satisfaction from the actual experience of ringing – the physical and mental sensations of doing it – then you can't get that by doing anything else. The squash club might provide more convivial socialising, and the choral society might rehearse in more comfortable surroundings, but if someone gets a buzz from performing on the end of a bellrope, that's a strong reason to stick with ringing.

### Success feeds success

Any performer, whether musician, athlete, orator or whatever, derives intrinsic satisfaction from performing well. It is not just a response to public adulation, or even an assessment of personal merit derived from 'ticking a box'. It is a direct response to the experience of performing, and sensing that you are doing it well. In something that physically engages the whole body in a precision rhythmic movement, like ringing or ballroom dancing, the feedback is heightened, and you can 'feel' that you are doing well, as well as 'knowing' that you are. Until a ringer gets to this level of performance, and feels at one with the action, (s)he is much more vulnerable to giving up if the novelty wears off, or if competing activities are on offer.

Ringing has the complication that there are two distinct aspects: the physical performance and the mental performance. Ideally they are intimately linked in the total experience, but some ringers focus on the mental performance to the exclusion of the physical performance. At the upper end, they will 'crash through a course

of Surprise', getting satisfaction from finding their way without getting lost (though they rarely strike in the correct place). At the other end of the spectrum, people spend months 'trying to learn Bob Doubles' thinking that the mental task is difficult, when it is their inability to put the bell where they want it, or even to be aware where it actually is, that makes it impossible to translate their theoretical knowledge into practice.

The first group derives some satisfaction from the mental performance, possibly backed up with the exhilaration of exercise, but not the full buzz of rhythmic performance. The second group just has the frustration of inadequate physical performance without knowing why.

### Conspiracy

Even ringers capable of good striking conspire to maintain a climate where it is not expected. Touches are rarely optimised for striking, or stopped if it is too poor. Bad striking rarely receives comment, and even constructive criticism is often seen as negative.

At the end of a touch, I normally wait for some decent rounds in order to end on a positive note. On one occasion I did this after a poorly struck practice touch, and since the rounds did not stabilise I asked the band to get them right before we stopped. It got a bit better, though we didn't achieve 'good' rounds. The only comment after we stopped was 'You'll never finish if you wait to get the rounds right'. The comment wasn't from a struggling member of the band, but from someone capable of ringing to competition standard on 12. The difference between us was not about what constitutes good striking, but about whether I was reasonable to expect a band that had just rung a touch of Major to make the effort to ring a few moderately even rounds at the end.

### Which way to go?

There are bands where everyone knows that good striking is expected, and the ringers all learn to build good striking into their ringing. It is self propagating, because each new recruit absorbs the culture and makes the effort to fit in. There are other bands where good striking is neither expected nor achieved. That too is self propagating because new recruits lack the example, the opportunity, or the incentive to learn how to strike well.

Bands that expect good striking tend to thrive because their members gain satisfaction from performing well. Often, they can also ring more stimulating methods because their progress is not hampered by poor striking.

The Exercise is becoming increasingly polarised between those who see themselves as performers (striving to strike whatever they ring as well as they can) and those who don't (for whom ringing is just a form of mental and physical exercise).

We have failed all those who we have allowed to become 'non-performers'. Can we help them to perform better, or must we accept that they can't change, and wait until they give up or die? And how can we avoid developing another generation of 'non-performers'?

Tolerating poor striking may make for a quiet life, but can we tolerate a high proportion of non-performers acting as a drain on the morale, and future health, of the Exercise?

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For publication in [The RingingWorld](#)