

London Surprise Major

Anna Aslanyan



Inside the Tower

St John-at-Hackney, an Anglican church in inner-city London, was built in 1792 to replace a medieval one. Its tower rises over a churchyard surrounded by houses and public gardens; inside, a narrow spiral staircase leads up to the top. Stephen Jakeman, the tower captain, ushers me into a room with 10 ropes dangling from holes in the ceiling, each with a soft grip attached to the middle and a loop tied at the end. The ropes are fastened to bells, which are out of sight. There are a dozen people in the room, and soon eight of them arrange themselves standing in a circle, each holding a rope. The weekly practice begins. At the prompting of one of the ringers, they start in quick succession, each working their rope rhythmically with both hands: pulling the rope down by the middle bit, catching the looped end as it rises, bringing the rope down again, and letting it go up again. The cycle takes a few seconds and is repeated over and over. The sound of the bells fills the room. The ringers stand still, except for their arms falling and rising. Every now and then Jakeman, without interrupting his movements, shouts “Bob,” “Single,” or something equally arcane (even after I learn the meaning of these terms, they still sound quaint, as do “hunt,” “dodge,” and “she”

in reference to a bell). It's impossible to tell who produces which sound in the polyphony; all I can make out is that the bells are all tuned to different notes and chime one by one, changing places in accordance with some elusive pattern.

Pattern is, in fact, everything in what's known as "change ringing," a tightly coordinated process that follows strict rules.¹ Each session begins with "rounds": the bells (usually between 5 and 12 of them, each tuned to a particular note and allocated to the same ringer for the duration of a piece) are rung to sound like scales, from the highest note to the lowest, several times. Then the band (as a collective of ringers is called) moves on to changes, or sequences in which notes are continually swapped: each sequence has every bell sounding exactly once, with no overlapping and only adjacent bells (those ringing next to each other in the current combination) swapping at any given time. Altering the order in which they strike, ringers run through various permutations of the notes at their disposal. There are two ways of doing it: "call changes," where the conductor prompts the ringers to swap, and "method ringing." A method is an algorithm defining a pattern for each bell to follow as it changes its position in the musical sequence. Amounting to a score composed of several notes with no chords, the patterns must be memorized by ringers. Using no visual aids, they strike continuously, without breaks or substitutions. No two changes can be repeated within a method, a constraint that's designed to make compositions more interesting.²

Ringers compensate for these restrictions by performing ever more complicated methods. Their holy grail—to exhaust the entire set of permutations afforded by a given number of bells—has its practical bounds. The maximum number of permutations for seven bells is 5,040 and takes about three hours to complete; for eight bells, it's 40,320, which would take an entire day.³ Such endurance sessions are rare; the longest documented performance, lasting 19 hours, took place in 1963 in Loughborough, England. To ring what campanologists call a peal, that is, a method featuring over 5,000 changes, you need a skilled band. Sometimes a peal marks an event—a ringer's birthday is as good an occasion as, say, a coronation—and sometimes it's done just for pleasure. More often, a group will ring a shorter composition, typically including several hundred combinations, sometimes before a Sunday service (most English bells are hung in Anglican church towers), sometimes for a secular celebration or a commemorative event. Changes can, of course, be ordered in a variety of ways, and it's the job of a composer to arrange a vast number of permutations into a pattern that would, while staying within the rules, possess enough symmetry to be learnable. The names of these compositions—such as *Spliced Treble Dodging Minor*, *Superlative Major*, *Scientific Triples*—"often cause the uninitiated to smile, but they convey a lot to the experienced ringer" (Cook 1987:16).

Formulating the principles of change ringing, a traditional English style, Fabian Stedman wrote: "For the practick part of this Art, is performed by means of imaginary, not real notions" (1677). He meant combinations of numbers, and that's what campanologists still use. The system of notation

Figure 1. (previous page) Ringers at Christ Church Spitalfields, 5 March 2023. (Photo by Anna Aslanyan)

Anna Aslanyan is a journalist and translator working from Russian. She writes for the Times Literary Supplement, the Spectator, and other publications, mainly about books and arts. Her popular history of translation, Dancing on Ropes: Translators and the Balance of History, was published by Profile in 2021. anna.aslanyan@hotmail.co.uk

1. The facts on bell ringing cited below can be found, for instance, in Ron Johnston's *Bell-Ringing* (1986).

2. Fragments of the scores of *London Surprise Major* and *Norwich Surprise Minor* can be viewed on Composition Library's website, respectively, at <https://complib.org/method/20166> and <https://complib.org/method/14317>.

3. These numbers are calculated according to a standard combinatorial formula as, respectively, $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6 \times 7$ and $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6 \times 7 \times 8$.

when asked about the origins of his dedication, he simply says, “The bug has to bite” (Jakeman 2023). Some of his colleagues, like him, started as teenagers, usually encouraged by their families; others took it up as adults in search of a hobby. The newest member of the band joined six months ago and is still learning to ring in concert with everyone. The most important qualities for a ringer are a sense of rhythm—bells are considered well struck when the donges are evenly spaced—and an ability to concentrate. I find it fascinating to watch people so focused as they work the ropes, their expressions ranging from blissfully vacant to painfully contorted, their lips pressed together or mouthing. In Ronald Blythe’s memorable description, “The ringers are utterly absorbed [...] the Self revels in noise, logic, arithmetic and a kind of intoxicating joy” ([1969] 1999:71).

Bell ringing in Britain has been studied from sociohistorical perspectives (Camp 1968; Johnston 1986; Sanderson 1987; Eisel and Wratten 1992; Cook and Wratten 1994). Whenever the question of its popularity arises, it is generally recognized as a niche activity. As things stand in 2023, there are about 30,000 ringers in the UK, according to the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers (CCCBR), which governs the country’s 69 local associations, all of them functioning on a voluntary basis. The council periodically attempts to recruit new members, and although these efforts have recently brought some new blood to the ringing societies—for instance, a campaign launched in late 2022 in preparation for the coronation of Charles III resulted in about 1,750 people starting to learn—the dropout rates, combined with aging, mean that there are still not enough campanologists to operate Britain’s 38,000 church bells (Sherwood 2023).

Once upon a time, ringing was a gentleman’s exercise, but today it’s an inclusive activity, with free tuition available to all and nominal fees charged for the use of towers. “There are few social divisions in the ringing-room today,” the geographer Ron Johnston wrote nearly 40 years ago (1986:17), and that was also my impression of every band I met. The ringing community includes people of different genders, ages, social backgrounds, and professions. Its ethnic makeup, however, is overwhelmingly white, though collectives based in demographically diverse areas naturally include both native Brits and immigrants.

The two dozen ringers I interviewed for this article, from groups mainly based in or near London, all describe what they do as a mental exercise. Many also value its physical benefits: though working the ropes requires little effort, it does amount to a mild aerobic workout. For most, it’s a hobby with an integral social side—drinks after practices, visits to notable towers—that strengthens a sense of fellowship created in the ringing chamber. Change ringing is also seen as a tradition: sometimes rooted in religion (there are surprisingly few churchgoers among London ringers, and anecdotal evidence suggests that outside big cities their proportions are greater, but not by much), more often reflecting broader continuities: familial, societal, and historical.

While happy to talk about the specifics of what they do in minute detail, my interviewees were less keen to discuss bells in wider contexts. Perhaps it’s their talent for focusing that makes ringers deeply invested in the here and now, so much so that anything beyond appears less important. Asked if they regarded ringing as art, most of them said no. One of the few exceptions was Jakeman, but when we talked about whether an upcoming performance would be recorded, he said: “Certainly not. It’s not the purpose of the Exercise” (Jakeman 2023). The latter is an insider’s term for ringing, and while books occasionally refer to it as “the Art,” on the whole it’s hard not to agree with Blythe, who mentions bell ringers’ indifference to “all the usual [...] art talk” ([1969] 1999:72).

Out in the Cold

Social histories of bell ringing tend to overlook its significance as a performative genre. It has never been analyzed in detail as a form of mass spectacle. For anyone wishing to fill this gap, London makes a good start. The ringing of church bells has been part of the city’s life for centuries, and while its purposes and occasions have partly changed, many of the places where it is practiced and experienced have not. London’s bell towers are mostly old and often occupy a spot where there has been a belfry for centuries. According to some claims, All Hallows-by-the-Tower was founded in CE 675, which would make the location of the church the oldest place of continuous worship in the

city; St Dunstan and All Saints, most historians agree, stands on a site that has been used for Christian liturgies for over a millennium; the list goes on. Finding themselves near these places—passing by, working, visiting, or living there—people can be drawn into a unique immersive performance.

Searching for links between bell ringing and other kinds of performance, one chilly Sunday morning I went to the Barbican, a performing arts center in London. Built in the 1950s, this brutalist complex, comprising art venues, public spaces, restaurants, and private apartments, is woven into the fabric of the city, complete with an old church. Dating back to the 14th century, St Giles-without-Cripplegate has a tower, added three centuries later, with 13 bells. They were going to be rung that morning, and I wanted to experience an old tradition in a contemporary culture hub. Waiting outside for the ringing to start, I thought of the role of bells in the texture of London's life.

One way to look at bells is in the light of chronological resonance, a concept introduced by the historian Peter Ackroyd to explain why some localities repeatedly generate similar events and behaviors. In *London: The Biography*, Ackroyd applies this notion to a city where “certain activities seem to belong to certain areas [...] as if time itself were moved or swayed by some unknown source of power” (2000:774). If this comes across as mystical, let us remember that ringing is firmly grounded in physics, economics, and human geography. As acoustic waves emanating from the belfry pervade the cityscape, mingling with other urban noises, old sounds are recreated and experienced anew by everyone within earshot. Kept alive by bell ringers and their audiences, this continuity is inherent in London's history.

Bells have been rung in London since at least the 10th century, when the bishop of London introduced them into the city's churches. In the early medieval period, they were used to measure time, to announce news, to warn citizens, as a form of revolt, to mourn, to celebrate, and to call people to worship. During the 16th century, in the wake of the Protestant Reformation and with the advent of Puritanism, liturgical uses of bells were gradually banned (Sanderson 1987). Bell ringing became a secular activity, its only remaining connection to ecclesiastical matters being the use of church towers (this state of affairs didn't change until the 19th century). When bells needed to be rung on special occasions, the church clerk would enlist the help of strong young men of the parish, who would “naturally take pleasure in the considerable physical exercise of swinging the bells as high as possible” (Cook 1987:30).

Another practice the Puritans saw as sinful was theatre, and so in 1642—after taking power in Parliament—they closed the London playhouses. An organic part of Londoners' leisure, theatre predictably went underground and remained there after a further restrictive act was passed in 1648. Bell ringing also continued in a secular fashion, and however tempting it might be to surmise that it compensated for the curtailment of theatre, historians avoid such speculations, instead suggesting that “the people of England had acquired a love of the sound of bells, and they were not prepared to see them taken away” (Cook 1987:35). And then, in 1649, the English reinvented the wheel—or rather, they took one and attached it to a bell hung in St Bartholomew-by-the-Exchange, a church in London (demolished in 1840). The invention greatly facilitated the act of ringing and was gradually adopted across the land. So it was that in 17th-century England, thanks to both technology and



Figure 3. The bells of Christ Church Spitalfields and their wheels, 5 March 2023. (Photo by Alan Regin)

a growing appetite for entertainment, bell ringing became a popular pastime, a sport more than an art. To this day, change ringing remains a predominantly English (as opposed to British) tradition, a fact sometimes attributed to economic factors historically at play.

What are the advantages of the wheel? Church bells are essentially tuned percussion instruments that can be played in a variety of ways, one of them known as full-circle ringing. In this mode, a bell hung from ball bearings is attached to a wheel with a rope wound around it, an efficient mechanism with which to handle objects weighing up to several tons. When the rope is pulled, the wheel turns, rotating the bell. Normally bells hang with their mouths facing downward. Before each ringing session they need to be “rung up”: each rope is pulled several times to gradually increase the amplitude of the bell until it faces upward, kept in an almost vertical position by a special device called a stay. Then the ringing proper starts: with a gentle pull of the rope, the bell is set off balance and rotates by nearly 360 degrees, sounding once as it rises, struck by the clapper when approximately horizontal (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYXleRD8qNQ).

Not only does the wheel-based installation make the pulling easy, but it also allows the ringer to control the speed of their bell as they alternately rotate the bell anticlockwise and clockwise, pulling the rope, respectively, by the middle part and by the end. The ringer can make small adjustments to the bell’s trajectory, slowing it down near its balance point or making it complete its rotation quicker by shortening its arc. In this way they vary the interval between the bell’s two successive dongs, usually two to three seconds, just enough for it to swap positions in the ringing sequence with another bell. To achieve this, the ringers watch and listen to each other, making sure their timing is precise. That, briefly, is the mechanics of full-circle ringing, a style where physical exertion is reduced to a minimum, leaving room for coordinated movement and mental absorption.

That morning, technological advances notwithstanding, the bells of St Giles stayed silent (no one appeared to know why, though the most common reason for canceled sessions, according to both historical and contemporary sources, is ringers’ lack of punctuality), so I went around in search of past listeners. Some of the Barbican’s staff were just beginning their shift. They’d heard the bells before and didn’t seem too disappointed about the quiet spell. Some said they never paid much attention to ringing, treating it as a background noise; some found it annoying, but only slightly. Comparisons were made between the sound of the bells and that of elevator doors; one worker said the bells were better than a brass band playing outside your window. The consensus was that “you get used to it.”

Among the Crowds

From St Giles-without-Cripplegate I walked to another old church, St James Clerkenwell, just in time to hear its bells chiming after the morning service. It was getting warmer, and people walking past and coming out of the church seemed more tolerant than those I’d met earlier. These auditors mostly liked the bells, though few lingered for long, even if the sounds made them feel “nostalgic” for their childhood. My interviewees defined the event as “a call to worship,” “something to draw you in,” and simply “church bells ringing.” Someone did use the word “performance,” while someone else said it was “not music but musical.” One passerby suggested it wasn’t for nothing that “bell” rhymed with “decibel”; another called it “an old-fashioned sound,” adding that it was “bloody loud.” The sound was not unpleasant to my ear, yet there was something about the acoustics of the place—a small street, usually very quiet—that didn’t agree with the reverberations. Someone asked me if I was doing a noise pollution survey. Such things do exist, as do complaints about churches ringing too loudly. However, it’s only rarely that Londoners write to the local councils about their right not to be disturbed, their comments including “Why do we allow others to use religion to justify antisocial behaviour?” (Beach 2009) and “It don’t half do my head in!” (Anon. 2010). The authorities’ decisions are based on whether the noise constitutes a “statutory nuisance,” a notion that’s as hard to define as bell ringing itself.

I left Clerkenwell and walked to St Paul’s Cathedral, one of London’s most recognizable landmarks, to listen to its bells. The area was full of tourists strolling around, taking pictures, and generally enjoying the sounds they called “amazing,” “beautiful,” and “majestic.” Some of the visitors spoke of ringing as a form of music; others said they could detect no tune, and yet there was a pleasant harmony to it. Just one person of the dozen or so I approached said, “I like it, but

do they go like that all day long?” Most identified the changes being rung as a typically English sound, familiar from such televised events as royal weddings and funerals. On learning that the ringing was live, people grew even more enthusiastic, fascinated by the idea of human performers. Such a reaction was to be expected: having paid for the chance to be near the bells, the tourists naturally wanted to make the most of their trip. However, for the visitors to St Paul’s the bells were a warm-up act rather than the headline event, the tour of the cathedral, for which they’d bought tickets. If I wanted to talk to a fully intentional audience, I had to create one.

When I asked Lorna Scott Fox, a fellow journalist and translator, if she fancied going to a bell ringing performance, she was skeptical until I explained it was live. That clinched it, and soon we were outside St John-at-Hackney, listening to a peal. Scott Fox found it reminiscent of gamelan music and somewhat “samey.” Though likely to ignore it if passing by, she became interested in the technique as we talked about what was going on inside the tower. Now that she knew the activity involved real people engaged in something very complex, my friend tried to “concentrate on separate notes and understand the pattern.” Amazed by the ringers’ skill, she called the process “a communal form of the production of sound.” Not a performance, then? “A performance implies speaking to an audience,” while this, in her view, was too “introverted” to qualify. The sound was muffled for the three-hour-long session: you could hear it in the churchyard, where it was hardly louder than someone’s phone playing music, but not across the road, where the traffic drowned it out. The peal was a success, and as the method came full circle, the bells straightened themselves into rounds before falling silent.

In the Papers

“The difficulty of scientific change-ringing is very much exaggerated—partly because so little is known about it,” says an article published in an Anglican newspaper at a time when ringing was newly affiliated with the church (*Guardian* 1906). It describes bell ringers as “casual and unpunctual, easily put out, and with but little self-control,” as well as partial to “liberal potatoes.” The piece also mentions “bad language and bad manners, and the old abuses that in the days gone by turned many a belfry into a pothouse.” In fact, similar complaints had been heard since ringing went secular during the Reformation—so much so that in the 19th century, the alleged disorder in the ringing community resulted in the reclamation of campanology by the church.

Historical sources with no religious agenda are less judgmental, especially with regard to recreational ringing. A German duke arriving in London in 1602 noted that “the young people do that for the sake of exercise and amusement, and sometimes they lay considerable amounts of money as a wager, who will pull a bell longest or ring it in the most approved fashion” (in Ackroyd 2000:71). Another account from the same period talks of London boys betting on “who can make the parish bells be heard at the greatest distance” (71). Commenting on these reports, Ackroyd mentions “an element of theatricality or bravura intrinsic to London and Londoners,” reminding us that the city loves noise and thrives on competition (72).

In the 18th century, competitive ringing became a popular media topic, reported in newspapers alongside other sporting events. Matches were advertised widely and aimed at various goals: to ring a particular method in the shortest time, “perform the greatest Variety of Peals,” or “strike the Bells the truest” (in Eisel and Wratten 1992:31). In 1725, for example, a great crowd assembled in the center of London to listen to a band ring 5,060 changes on 12 bells. A newspaper report called it “a glorious Peale of four Hours and a half long,” adding that the audience “were all of Opinion, that it exceeded every thing of that Nature that had at any time before been in England” (in Eisel and Wratten 1992:51). Another article from 1725 reports that three hours in, a performance was interrupted by a broken rope “to the great Disappointment of the Gentlemen, and a numerous Audience in the Street” (in Cook and Wratten 1994:27). An account of a competition held in 1784 says that the defeated band “were obliged to quit the steeple through private doors in order to avoid that loud reception which was prepared for them by their auditors, and which they so justly deserved!” (in Cook and Wratten 1994:75). In its heyday, bell ringing in London was an essential part of urban spectacle: a cross between performance, drama, and sport.

By the late 19th century, fan crowds were gone, but peals continued to feature in papers like *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, where “Change Ringing” was a regular column sandwiched somewhere between “Swimming” and “Rackets,” with the occasional theatre advert thrown in. The column was confined to factual notices: the date and place of the performance, the details of the composition, the duration, and the ringers’ names. The media “stimulated the competitive aspect of the Exercise,” thus promoting it (Eisel 1998:n.p.).

In the first half of the 20th century, bell ringing in Britain gave way to another organized activity: war. The decades after WWII saw it regain some of its popularity, though the process was slow. In the 2000s, there was an increase in the number of people taking up ringing, sparked by a nationwide campaign to ring in the new millennium. The campaign culminated in the largest ever ringing event, when 95% of church bells in the country were rung on 1 January 2000. The opening of the Olympic Games in London on 27 July 2012 was marked with another mass event, a public performance created by the artist Martin Creed. “Work No. 1197: All the bells in a country rung as quickly and loudly as possible for three minutes” involved just that, featuring various church, door, school, and bicycle bells.

In 2016, in another attempt to bring bells to the masses, a group of British campanologists proposed to officially classify ringing as a sport. Envisaged to increase funding and attract young participants, the suggestion generated a few headlines—mainly of the “Ding-Dong Debate” variety—but didn’t “chime well” with the CCCBR, which blocked the idea as potentially detrimental to its relationship with the church (*Express* 2016). This reaction echoed that of 19th-century skeptics, among them one Reverend Robert Waller, who “declared that he would as soon allow a prize fight in his belfry as allow ringing on Sundays” (Fay 2015).

These days the Exercise, having been transformed from a strenuously physical to a predominantly mental activity, retains a sporting element in the form of ringing competitions. The principal judging criterion is the precision with which bells are struck—in other words, the main opponent the ringers compete against is time. When Stedman, laying the basis for change ringing, wrote that “the practitioner ought to [...] have some judgment in beating time,” he might not have aimed for a pun but still made a good point (1677). As you walk around London today, hearing church bells often makes you feel that “time seems to come to an end or ceaselessly to repeat itself” (Ackroyd 2000:665).

Under the Portico

Being frozen in time, or indeed having no watch, doesn’t prevent one from being late. In the 16th century, apprentices in the City of London complained that the clerk of St Mary-le-Bow made them work overtime by ringing well past the agreed hour, and he promised to mend his ways (Ackroyd 2000:61). I was reminded of this when a young Londoner running a coffee stall near the same spot told me with a chuckle, “When they ring, I know I’m late for work.” Referring to the famous bells of Bow—according to an old belief, one must be born within their earshot to be considered a true Londoner, or Cockney—his words made me think of time flowing through the old church. It was founded in 1080 and rebuilt over the centuries, most notably by Christopher Wren in 1680, after the 1666 Great Fire of London. During the Blitz, the church was damaged by bombs, its bells destroyed. In 1956, when postwar austerity began to lift, 12 new bells were installed in the tower, where they remain to this day.

In the second half of the 20th century, a shorter working day and growing mobility were conducive to bell ringing (Johnston 1986:255). Toward the beginning of the 21st century, as economic forces turned London into a stronghold of gentrification, Cockneys got priced out of the East End, usually moving to places where the bells of Bow never bothered anyone. Those who stayed in London also lost some of their acoustic legacy: a 2012 study showed that increased levels of ambient noise had shrunk the reach of the bells to just a small part of the area where they could be heard 150 years ago.

Maternity wards have long disappeared from the areas still covered by the bells of St Mary-le-Bow, so according to the folkloric definition, no one can be called a true Londoner today. Approaching the church for yet another vox pop, I therefore wasn't expecting to meet many traditionally described Cockneys. That evening, the Ancient Society of College Youths, established in 1637, took over the church for a practice. The bells were chiming loud and clear, and the excitement in the financial heart of London was palpable. People gathered outside the church, looking around. A man struggled to locate the source of the sound and was surprised to learn it was right above his head. A group of youngsters dressed for a night out lingered under the portico. They had been on their way to meet friends but heard the bells and made a detour to find out what was up. A musician said these "random but intriguing" sounds weren't melodic yet could be classed as music. "You can feel it in your breast," a woman said. Meanwhile, commuters hurried past as they do every evening, paying little attention to the bells (some were wearing headphones), but those who did stop said it was nice to hear them after a working day. Some passersby inquired about the occasion; others claimed to be enjoying the serendipity of the moment—it was enough to know that the ringing "signifies that something is occurring."

My most memorable conversation under the portico was with a man who turned 70 that day. Born a few miles from where we stood, he wanted to celebrate his birthday as befits a real Londoner, listening to the bells of Bow. He came to the church just before seven o'clock, hoping to record the great bell chime the hour, and got a surprise present when all 12 of them rung out. During the performance, there was a sense that we were all contributing to the soundscape of the city as the chimes resonated across it like aural memories of some collective past. When the ringers finished their piece, drinkers outside the nearest pub cheered.

To make the Bow bells available to everyone, regardless of London's noise and property prices, the BBC used to play a recording of them as an interval signal. In 2009, the broadcaster commissioned the composer Benjamin Till to write music for "Oranges and Lemons," a piece that involved every bell featured in the eponymous nursery rhyme.⁴ Till recorded 200 bells separately and



Figure 4. St Mary-le-Bow, 6 March 2023. (Photo by Anna Aslanyan)

4. One version of it begins as follows: "Oranges and lemons / Say the bells of St Clement's / You owe me five farthings / Say the bells of St Martin's."

arranged them in a studio, concluding with the bells of Bow. When it was performed at St Mary-le-Bow on 10 July 2009—with both the recordings and live musicians—the real church bells chimed at the end.

When we meet, Till tells me that he sees bell ringing as a folk art. His interest in “Oranges and Lemons” stems from the fact that the rhyme portrays the churches as parts of London’s palimpsest, linking them to trades historically associated with certain areas (Till 2023). The bells, in their turn, serve as memory repositories that “have been there for centuries, soaking in events around them.” Take the oldest extant church in London, St Bartholomew the Great: its five bells were cast in the early 16th century and are still in use. Drawing on Handel’s definition of the bell as the English national musical instrument, Till says it has some mystical qualities, as inexplicable as its Englishness. As for the appeal of change ringing, in his view, it’s similar to that of math (a few of my interviewees also likened their practice to science, stressing its numerical side). Musically, Till calls ringing “the ultimate form of minimalism,” pointing out that both genres are based on repetition and consequently gravitate to endurance performances.

Dealing with campanologists throughout his project, Till experienced a great deal of suspicion on their part toward any attempts to use bells for nontraditional purposes. Compared to musicians, he thinks, ringers are less emotional about their art, more prone to get angry at mistakes, and less likely to collaborate with each other closely, possibly because they don’t need to tune in with the rest. That brings us to Till’s interest in links between creativity and autism. “Bell ringing attracts a certain type of person: obsessive, scientific, slightly lonely,” he says. “It’s a way of interacting with others while keeping your own position” (2023). His opinion is echoed by Eisel’s: “Ringing has its fair share of characters, and always has done” (1998:n.p.).

Around the Square

Whatever stereotypes might have been planted in my mind, they all disappear when I meet Alan Regin, a gregarious man with a ready laugh, a campanologist with more than 50 years of experience. He started ringing at 11, together with his brother and another pair of boys, in a village outside London. What got him hooked was rivalry and the thrill of being able to control these massive objects. He also liked, and still does, the fact that “there is a place for everyone” in the ringing room (Regin 2023). Now retired and free to pursue his passion, Regin arrives to meet me in Trafalgar Square after an attempt to ring a peal. A mistake resulted in it being abandoned nearly three hours into the performance, with 25 minutes left to go. Regin shows me sheets with the method they used, the blue line snaking down the rows of numbers. We talk about his love of London bells—he moved to the city because there is no place like it for ringing—as we walk around the square to St Martin-in-the-Fields, another iconic church with 13 bells. Regin, a long-standing member of the Society of Royal Cumberland Youths, a ringing association founded in 1747, is here to practice with his colleagues.

In the 19th century, a committee conducting an inquiry into St Martin’s parish affairs noted the amount spent on “Ringing of Bells” and recommended that churchwardens “make less noise in this way in future” (in Johnson 2005:163). Today, the church’s sound control system ensures that the bells are barely audible outside, and the traffic further dilutes their chiming. Ringing can also clash with more mainstream forms of entertainment. Silenced during WWII, after its end the bells of St Martin’s were rung so enthusiastically that it provoked complaints from audiences listening to a concert at the National Gallery across the road. Nowadays, it’s mass events in Trafalgar Square that the church is careful not to disrupt. Not wishing to alienate the “silent majority,” one ringer recently suggested in an association newsletter that it would be useful to “recognise that a peal is a performance as much for its audience as it is for its performers,” and that towers should allow potential auditors to “share in the soundscape we are imposing on them” (Baulcombe 2022). A couple of my interviewees also made this point.

The beauty of it, Regin tells me, is that “the bells are all different.” No two towers produce the same sound, though it may not be obvious to the outsider. While the bells of St Martin’s do

have a distinctive tone, it's hard to tell whether this originality is down to their condition or the ringers' skill. One thing I'm sure about: it feels more organic down in the street, mixed with the city's ambience, than up in the tower. When we talk about different perceptions of ringing, Regin laughs as he remembers someone saying, about a peal rung in another London church, "It wouldn't have been so bad had it not all sounded the same." To him, by contrast, it's all about variety and chance. A process requiring several people to synchronize thousands of movements will always contain an element of surprise.

"One of the peculiarities of the Exercise," Eisel writes, "is its current obsession with statistics and records" (1998:n.p.). The tower of St Martin's has several boards on its walls with details of record-breaking performances. This, too, is part of an age-old tradition. In March 1728, two ringing societies had a contest at St Martin's on recently installed bells. One of them "set a record by ringing the longest 12-bell peal—6,000 Grandsire Cinques. The next day their rivals rang 6,314 in the same method" (Johnson 2005:140). Records continue to be set in various scenarios, including day-long marathons, unconduted peals, all-female and children's bands, bands consisting of people with the same first name, and so on. Regin tells me it's not about numbers: he likes long peals because that's where you get the best ringing. The process itself is more important than the result, he says, adding, "We aim for perfection" (2023).

Surrounded by Spectacle

Choosing notes over numbers, at our first meeting Regin didn't mention that he was in fact the world's number two in the number of peals rung. During that week alone, he completed several more, getting to 6,373, though not quite catching up with Colin M. Turner from Oxfordshire, whose total in February 2023 stood at 7,910. Not interested in records per se, Regin did set at least one, on 23 April 2005, when he took part in a performance that lasted 11 hours and 35 minutes and featured 17,280 changes, the longest version of *London Surprise Major* ever completed. A manual describing the method reads like experimental poetry: "All bells treble bob hunt above the treble either right or wrong" (Anon. n.d.). The peal was rung at Christ Church Spitalfields, a magnificent creation of Nicholas Hawksmoor, built in 1729. A visionary architect, Hawksmoor inspired the eponymous novel by Ackroyd, whose protagonist wants his masterpiece to "have one Bell only since too much Ringing disturbs the Spirits" (1985:9). The real church did have just one bell installed



Figure 5. Christ Church Spitalfields, 5 March 2023. (Photo by Anna Aslanyan)

in 1731; then others were added—at one point there were 12—and replaced from time to time, ending in the current 8. Cast in 1919, they make for a mesmerizing sight when viewed from above. Standing in the belfry, looking down into the space where they are nestled alongside their wheels, you feel overwhelmed by this intricate arrangement of metal, rope, and wood. The bells are huge, but if you look up, they are instantly dwarfed by the enormous steeple, which seems to dictate its own rules.

Hawksmoor, whose working principles were based “upon Strong Reason and Good Fancy, Joyn’d with experience and tryalls” (in Hart 2007:74), was no fan of bells, or indeed any other flourishes, partly for aesthetic and ideological reasons, but also because his London commissions had a tight budget. Christ Church Spitalfields was another of the churches built to replace those destroyed by the Great Fire and paid for through a coal tax introduced by the city authorities. Today, restoration projects are funded by a mixture of donors, including heritage organizations, church bodies, local communities, ringing societies, and individuals. By the end of the last century, the building in Spitalfields—a vibrant, culturally diverse area—was in total disrepair, and it took a local fundraising campaign to restore it. The 2005 performance of *London Surprise Major* was dedicated to the memory of Eric Elstob, one of the people behind the initiative.

On another Sunday morning, people out in Spitalfields walk into a performance centered on the Hawksmoor church, whose bells are ringing today. Their effect is uplifting, which may be largely to do with their quality and the ringers’ proficiency, but the place also contributes to it. Instead of echoey pockets, here you have two wide streets intersecting at a right angle, forming a solid acoustical and visual background. The laws of perspective meet the laws of physics. The ringers join forces with the architect and the town planners as the notes they strike perfectly fit into this geometry. At the sound of the bells, passersby stop, look up, as if hoping to see inside the belfry, and briefly become part of the spectacle, transforming its sight and sound. The “intrinsic theatricality of city life,” to quote Jonathan Raban, results in a show “intended [...] for the city at large—that uncountable audience of strangers” ([1974] 1998:29). Some of the scenes—a homeless man sitting on a bench, a market trader unloading his goods, a child running up and down the steps of the church—could have unfolded here three centuries ago to the accompaniment of the same sounds. The bells keep ringing, as immune to time as the white stone of the church, the straight line of the street leading to it, and the brick of the houses crouching in its shadow.

Beating Time

Bell ringing is not widely acknowledged as art, and yet there are undeniable links between the two phenomena, which don’t so much resemble as complement each other. With ringing, the drama unfolds out of the audience’s sight—within the tower walls and inside the ringers’ heads—while what can be heard outside may seem a mere byproduct. Other conventions are also reversed: the listeners are mostly unwitting and sometimes unwilling; the ringers relish their invisibility and rarely see themselves as artists; the audience doesn’t need to focus to hear at least something, whereas the performers are never guaranteed to achieve their goal, however hard they concentrate. The ringers’ reluctance to define what they do as art doesn’t rule out such a definition: the icon painters of old, for instance, didn’t see themselves as artists either. If bell ringing doesn’t lend itself easily to classification, the same is true of much art.

The historical circumstances of ringing in England demonstrate that it’s as arbitrary in its development as any creative work. Had no one thought of attaching a bell to a wheel, ringing could have remained a purely physical activity; had the Puritans kept theatre banned for longer, ringing could have grown more prominent as a form of entertainment. Today, performing arts are so popular in Britain that churches offer their buildings for hire to various collectives. Before the tower, too, is turned into a performance space, let’s take another moment to reflect on the aspects of ringing that are best understood through pivoting to topography and history.

“There are few activities more public in their impact than bell-ringing” (Johnston 1986:180). Indeed, it is an immersive, all-encompassing mass spectacle, a kind of site-specific performance where the site both enables and shapes it. It takes especially interesting forms in London, merging with various patterns of activity in an old city that has an endless capacity for renewal. Those pulling the ropes respond to the pull of the place, as do those who happen to be within earshot of the bells. Viewed from this perspective, bell ringing is yet another mechanism that keeps London’s chronological resonances alive. An order discovered centuries ago is generated anew and projected into a constantly evolving urban chaos—a unique way of beating time.

References

- Ackroyd, Peter. 1985. *Hawksmoor*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Ackroyd, Peter. 2000. *London: The Biography*. Chatto & Windus.
- Anonymous. n.d. “Learning Methods: Getting It Right the First Time.” www.northbucksbranch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/London-Methods-London-Surprise-Major.pdf
- Anonymous. 2010. “I live right next to st marys church, it don’t half do my head in!” *FixMyStreet*, 30 August. www.fixmystreet.com/report/47551
- Beach, Chris. 2009. “Church bells ringing loudly and continuously 9:00–9:30 every Sunday morning.” *FixMyStreet*, 6 March. www.fixmystreet.com/report/47551
- Baulcombe, Harry. 2022. “For whom, what, where and why the bells toll.” *Middlesex Bell News* 111, September. www.bellringing.london/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Bell-News-111-Sept-2022.pdf
- Blythe, Ronald. (1969) 1999. *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village*. Penguin.
- Camp, John. 1968. *Discovering Bells and Bellringing*. Shire.
- Cook, William T. 1987. “The Development of Change Ringing as a Secular Sport.” In *Change Ringing: The History of an English Art*, vol. 1, ed. J. Sanderson, 28–39. The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers.
- Cook, W.T., and C.A. Wratten. 1994. *Change Ringing: The History of an English Art*, vol. 3. The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers.
- Eisel, John C. 1998. *Giants of the Exercise: Some Notable Ringers of the Past*. The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers.
- Eisel, John C., and Cyril A. Wratten. 1992. *Change Ringing: The History of an English Art*, vol. 2. The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers.
- Express*. 2016. “Ding-dong Debate: Should Church Bell Ringing Be Reclassified as a SPORT?” 17 February. www.express.co.uk/news/uk/644922/Debate-erupted-world-church-bell-ringing-hobby-made-sport
- Fay, Prudence. 2015. “The Day that Maths Was Turned into Music.” *Church Times*, 1 May. www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2015/1-may/features/features/the-day-that-maths-was-turned-into-music
- The Guardian*. 1906. *Church Bells and Bell-Ringing: A Series of Articles Reprinted from The Guardian*. Guardian office.
- Hart, Vaughan. 2007. *Nicholas Hawksmoor: Rebuilding Ancient Wonders*. Yale University Press.
- Jakeman, Stephen. 2023. Personal interview with author. London, 30 January.
- Johnson, Malcolm. 2005. *St Martin-in-the-Fields*. Phillimore.
- Johnston, Ron. 1986. *Bell-Ringing: The English Art of Change-Ringing*. Viking.
- Raban, Jonathan. (1974) 1998. *Soft City*. Harvill.
- Regin, Alan. 2023. Personal interview with author. London, 8 February.
- Sanderson, J., ed. 1987. *Change Ringing: The History of an English Art*, vol. 1. The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers.
- Sherwood, Harriet. 2023. “A Peal Appeal: Bellringer Shortage as King Charles’s Coronation Looms.” *The Guardian*, 4 April. www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/apr/04/bellringer-shortage-king-charles-coronation-looms

Stedman, Fabian. 1677. *Campanalogia*. W. Godbid. quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A61376.0001.001/1:4.2?rgn=div2;view=toc

Till, Benjamin. 2023. Personal interview with author. London, 2 February.

TDRreadings

Kapchan, Deborah. 2013. "The Aesthetics of the Invisible: Sacred Music in Secular (French) Places." *TDR* 57, 3 (T219):132–47. doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00283

Schipper, Imanuel. 2014. "City as Performance." *TDR* 58, 3 (T223):18–26. doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00370