

Gender Imbalance in Conducting and Composing

In our last article we examined where in the circle women are ringing. This week we will be looking at quarter peals (QPs) and peals conducted by women, with a brief look at composing too.

The data in this article is also taken from Bellboard, and again examining data from the year 2009 (01/02/2009-01/02/2010) and 2019 (01/02/2019-01/02/2020).

	% of performances with woman conducting	
All assignments	2009	2019
Overall	10.6	11.9
Tower QPs	12.2	13.7
Tower Peals	6.0	4.7
Handbell QPs	8.7	7.5
Handbell Peals	12.4	4.1

Figure 1 - Women conducting Hand and Tower Peals and QPs, 2010 and 2020

Figure 1 shows the proportion of performances conducted by women, in 2009 and 2019. At a first glance, a greater proportion of performances was conducted by women in 2019 than in 2009, however this is largely due to a higher proportion of tower bell QPs being called by women (more tower bell QPs are submitted than any other type of performance).

The 2009 data is known to be incomplete - Bellboard was only set up in 2012 and we don't know how big a proportion of performances before then have been uploaded, particularly for quarter peals. Our data is presented as percentages rather than absolute numbers, allowing a comparison between the two years. It is unlikely that the gender distribution of a band would alter whether a performance was uploaded to Bellboard, and the number of performances analysed in 2009 is still high, so we don't expect this to impact our data significantly. Although only two data points aren't enough to identify a trend, the data shared by Lynn Scales (07/08/2020) shows a small but gradual increase in the proportion of QPs conducted by women between 2012 and 2020, consistent with our data.

Sadly, fewer women are calling towerbell peals in 2019 than 2009 (again, Lynn's data from pealbase is also consistent with a downward trend in this time frame). The biggest change seen is in women conducting handbell peals - this is entirely explained by two prolific female handbell conductors calling substantially fewer handbell peals in 2019 than they did in 2009.

Women represent a greater proportion of unique (or distinct) conductors in 2019 than in 2009 (an increase of 44%) - in 2019 18.6% of all conductors in our analysed performances were female. Because the percentage of performances conducted by women (11.9%) is smaller than the percentage of female conductors (18.6%), this means that on average each female conductor is calling fewer performances than non-female conductors.

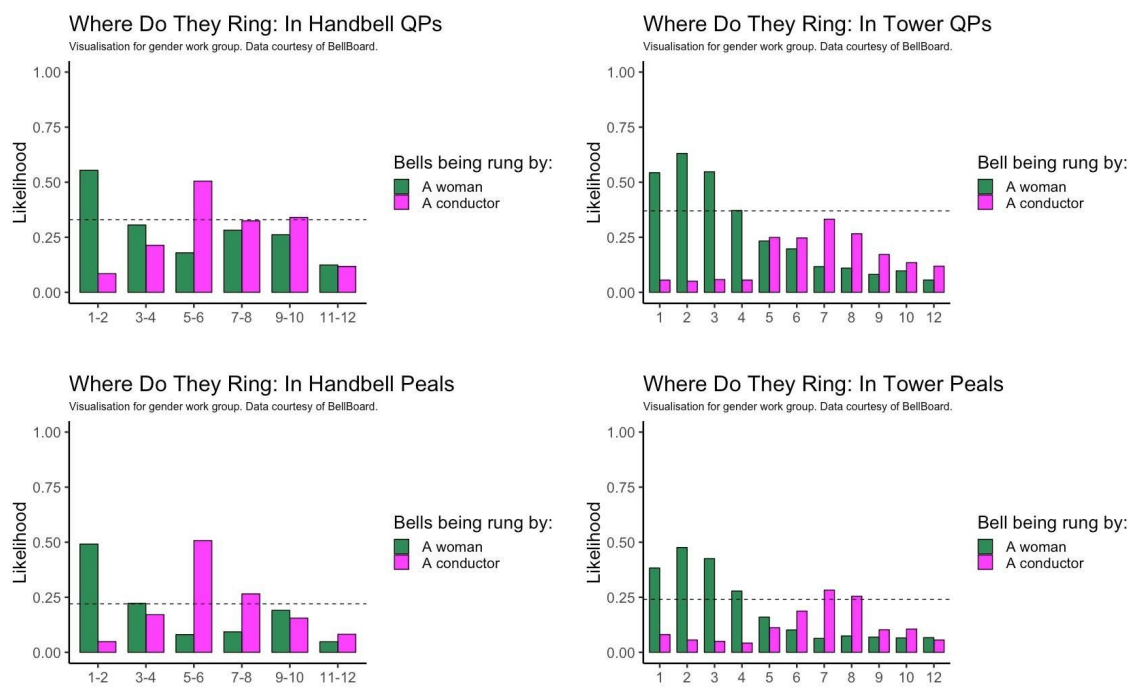


Figure 2 - Where in the circle performances are called from, vs where in the circle women ring, for 2019 Bellboard data

Where there is discussion about the lack of female conductors, it is often speculated that a lot of conductors call peals and quarter peals from around the middle or back section of the circle, often from a traditionally “fixed” bell.

Figure 2 compares the probabilities of specific bells and positions being rung by women (in green), and also by conductors (pink). The data in these charts is cumulative across all stages from 4-12 bells, so “8” could represent a tenor to triples or major, or a middle bell to cinques or maximus. Because most of the probabilities are representing different stages, the probabilities for each set of data don’t add up to one.

These charts allow a direct comparison between where in the circle performances are called from (overwhelmingly the middle and back sections of the circle), and where in the circle women ring (greatly overrepresented around the front) - demonstrating an obvious disparity.

Composing

Data analysis was also performed on Complib to estimate the percentage of composers that are women. A data cleaning process was used – compositions submitted with initials (i.e. the first name wasn’t submitted) or with programmes such as SMC32 or BYROC was removed, leaving a pool of 931 composers. These were run through the USA SSA data, giving a probabilistic gender estimation. This provided an estimate that only 2-5% of complib composers are female.

Discussion

As also discussed in Lynn’s article, women are greatly underrepresented in conducting, seen across both tower and hand QPs and peals, with fewer women calling peals than QPs. There are several points arising from the data shown in this article that may go some way to improving this situation.

There is a disparity between where women are ringing in the circle versus where performances are being called from. This suggests a two-pronged approach to increasing the number of women conducting - either in encouraging women to become more comfortable in ringing further round the middle or back of the circle, or in teaching more conductors to call from round the front. These are both valuable skills - it's always useful to have ringers who are confident and competent to ring in different areas of the circle, and it's even more useful having conductors who are flexible in where they can conduct from.

In the same way that traditionally an inexperienced conductor may choose to call a largely tenors together composition from a "fixed" bell, making it easier to track the calling positions and freeing up brain space for other aspects of conducting, there are compositions that are more easily called from lighter bells. Teaching conducting could focus more on skills which would make it easier to call from anywhere in the circle too - such as observing the tenor's position from a working bell, and using the coursing order at calls to work out where you will be when a call is put in. Arguably these are skills that would strengthen any conductors learning to call from heavier/fixed bells too.

While examining the Bellboard data, Bryn Reinstadler observed that there are a lot of conductors who have called fewer than ten peals, and a lot of conductors who have called over fifty, but comparatively few occupy the space in between ten and fifty peals. This suggests that there is value in "getting your name out there" - the more peals you call, the more likely you will call more - probably a combination of having the confidence to do so, and gaining a reputation as an experienced conductor. This is important considering that individual women are generally calling fewer performances than men. It may be the case that trying to get more female conductors to reach this "threshold" above which they are likely to become more established conductors would help to iron out the differences observed in this article.

In my own experience, I found that opportunities and encouragement to conduct early in my ringing career, as well as organising my early conducting performances, benefited me greatly. Based on this, and the observations in this article, I would encourage all learners (or more experienced ringers!) to be proactive in this - whether that's organising your own quarter peals/peals, or asking for opportunities to call touches on practice nights. I also urge ringers who haven't considered conducting yet to give it a go, even if you don't think it's likely to be your thing - as with ringing in general, there are many different facets and skills to it, and great versatility.

It's also really important that those in positions of responsibility or organisation in ringing consider different genders equally in allocating conducting. If this project could just achieve each tower captain or quarter peal/peal organiser who reads this article to encourage or invite one woman (if not more) to start conducting, we could see the tide turned on the apparent decline of female conductors over the last decade.

The greatest gender maldistribution seen in this article was in female composers. Women may only account for 2% of all Complib composers. It would be very hard to gather data on composers who conduct and vice versa (as we have used two different data sources for these), but it is often speculated that conducting and composing are closely linked, with composers wanting to call their own work, or conductors seeking out new challenges in what can be achieved in composition. It may be the case that addressing one of these aspects would lead to an increase in the other.

Summary

To summarise our data so far, we now know that we have a near-even gender split upon recruitment, and through basic stages of learning. This is lost at more advanced levels of ringing -

both in contest ringing, and in ringing quarter peals and peals. This is neatly demonstrated by Figure 3.

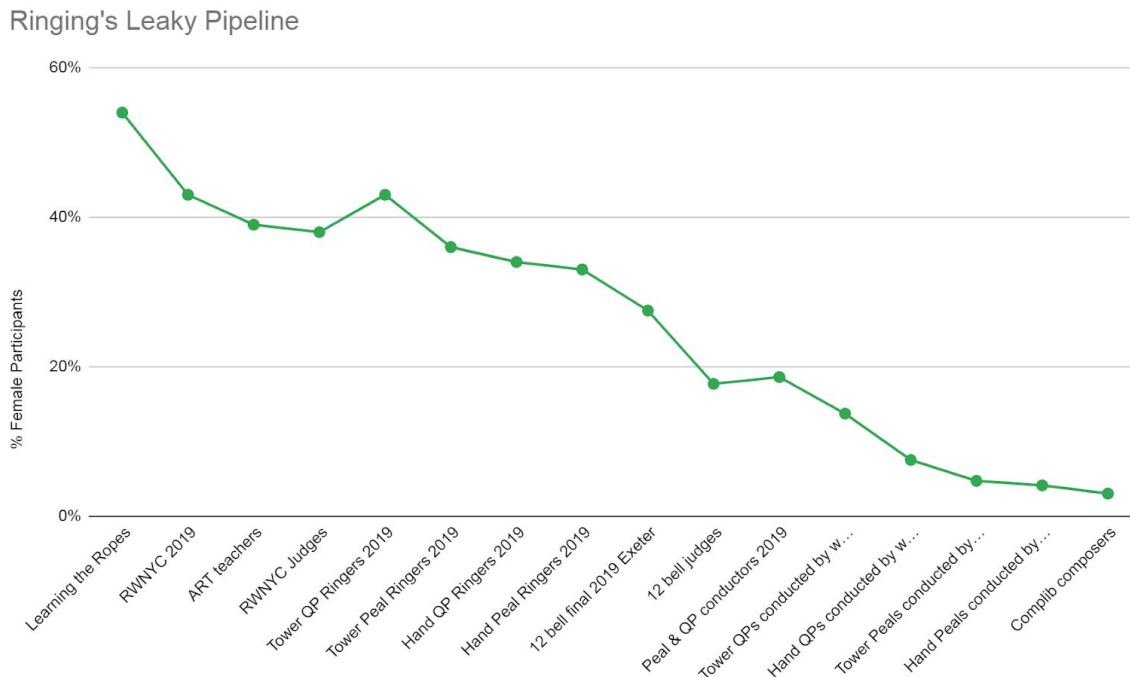


Figure 3 - Female participation in data collect from ART, RWNYC, National 12 Bell Striking Contest, Bellboard and Complib.

As we examine different skills, women are overrepresented in front bell ringing, but underrepresented in ringing back bells, conducting performances and in composing. This article shows that there is a link between these skills - far fewer performances are conducted from front bells, which is where women are ringing in most of these performances. This data doesn't explore the "why" - is this explained by genuine gender differences, an unconscious bias in our hobby, or a broader societal issue pushing women away from more physical or mathematical challenges? Using information gleaned in our "[womeninringing](https://www.womeninringing.info/)" website as well as other research into gender differences, we hope to be able to understand some of the factors which may contribute to gender imbalance in ringing and to provide some suggestions to address this imbalance.

If you have any experiences, observations or thoughts you would like to share on this topic, please visit <https://www.womeninringing.info/> and share your story. Both you and any ringers mentioned in your submission will be anonymous when published, and there is an option to share your story with the gender working group without it being published.

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