BOSTON UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

Dissertation

HANDBELL ENSEMBLE RINGING AS A HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE:
ISSUES OF EMBODIED PRACTICE, MUSICAL COMMUNITAS
AND ACCESSIBILITY

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts
2017
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is the result of contributions by a number of members of the handbell community.

Drs. Vu and Smith, my advisors have been nothing short of a gift from God. Thank you, Dr. Vu, for your guidance, inspiration, patience, and encouragement throughout this long process. Thank you, Dr. Smith, for pushing me to achieve higher than I ever expected, and encouraging me until the very end. I’m so thankful to both of you for your influence in my work and life.

Thank you to Dr. Wayne Bowman, whose seminal work in the area of body-based music education fueled the potential for this study. Your willingness to provide materials and encouragement in this endeavor made me feel the importance of this study and the contribution it could bring to music education.

Thank you to Dr. William Bauer, President of the Dalcroze Society of America, who spent time communicating with me over the phone and through emails to help me fully understand Dalcroze’s intention with regard to movement and music education.

I would like to thank my colleague and friend, Dr. John Behnke, who was always willing to answer questions and to edit my chapter on the history and culture of handbell ringing, as well as Michael Joy, Kevin McChesney, D. Linda McKechnie, James Walters, and Timothy Waugh who generously contributed to the integrity of this study with their expertise. Thank you!

Finally, I could not have endured this long process without the support of my loving and selfless family. Thank you, Nanny, for your exemplary life of hard work and
the benefits I am reaping as a result of it. Thank you, Mom and Dad for your unrelenting support, help and encouragement. You were the constant that I could rely on throughout the entire process. And to Madeline, my beautiful daughter—thank you for your patience during a process that was less than kind to your early childhood. I am looking forward to the rest of our lives together.
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Boston University College of Fine Arts, 2017

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ABSTRACT

Issues of embodiment, musical communitas, and accessibility have been adapted by music educators and music therapists within their practices. Music education in general may benefit from the unique aspects of what these models have to offer. In this qualitative phenomenological research study, I examined the perceptions of a diverse sampling of handbell musicians and their directors with respect to the three phenomena of embodiment, musical communitas, and accessibility. The findings were compared to existing research related to various forms of embodied learning, musical communitas as seen through the field of music therapy, and accessibility as defined by universal design concepts.

The central questions that guided this study were:

1. What are handbell musicians’ perceptions of embodied handbell ringing and/or embodied learning?

2. What are handbell musicians’ perceptions of functioning as one unified instrument?

3. How are handbells unique with regard to their accessibility?
The data revealed seven themes with regard to embodiment and whole-body expression, seven with regard to musical communitas, and six with regard to accessibility. Three unrelated themes, as well as a small instance of conflicting data with regard to accessibility, were reported and addressed. Consistent throughout the transcripts was the use of three words: together, everyone/everybody, and whole (as in holistic or not divided). This common language represents a sympathetic resonance that existed among the participants without respect to age, position, or experience.

Music educators may benefit from more research in music education based in embodied learning to strengthen the acceptance of the body, not as supplemental, but as foundational in music learning, and to dispel the “either/or” notions that place the body in opposition to the brain. The design of the handbell ensemble may provide a model for music making that values embodiment, communitas, and accessibility, which can address a number of music education’s current goals including creating, performing, and responding (NAfME, 2014b).

**Keywords:** handbells, embodiment, embodied learning, musical communitas, accessibility, universal design, phenomenology as method
Preface: My Portrait of a Handbell Musician

As a medium, we are a mixture of exquisite musicianship, heavenly, penetrating sound, pomp, and kitsch. Our mission and experiences differ greatly from ensemble to ensemble, but we are all convinced that we have discovered the quintessential instrument. We travel great distances to participate in the ensemble of our choice; some even fly. As individuals, we love each other like family, and meet each other’s needs beyond the music making. Some feel that we are an elite instrument requiring great skill and a deep understanding of musical structure, while some feel that the instrument can, and should, be all things to all people—the ambassador to those without a musical voice—to whosoever will. We are members of Facebook and Google groups because we count on our fellow ringers to help us with a variety of challenges that emerge as our art form evolves. We own handbell license plates, phone covers, jewelry, and t-shirts. We eat, sleep, and breathe handbells because it resides in the deepest part of who we are. We are passionate, collaborative, and highly possessive—a highly individualistic family.

Figure 1. Twin Cities Bronze, photo courtesy of Handbell Musicians of America (www.handbellmusicians.org)
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Chapter One: Prelude to Ensemble Ringing

We, as a team, created BEAUTY together. We memorized together, we went over the same three measures 15 times together, and we MOVED together. We as a team became one body of beauty makers. We created magic. And if that doesn’t change your life or make you feel like you have truly succeeded, then I don’t know what will. — Sarah Crane, Former Student

Personal Context: A Phenomenal Discovery

In 1988, I was an aspiring young choral director attending a “Church Music Explosion” conference in Fort Lauderdale, FL where I had the privilege of singing under the direction of John Rutter. One of the featured concerts that weekend was by the late David Davidson’s Dallas Handbell Ensemble. The sound of the ensemble was unlike anything I had ever heard. As the musicians moved their instruments through space, it was the first time I had ever seen an embodied musical performance, yet at that time I was unaware of what the word “embodied” meant. I keenly remember taking notes on the program, but had no ambition to become a handbell musician.

For the next 10 years, I taught choral music and private voice, and became increasingly dissatisfied with my career choice for a number of reasons. Just when I was about to give up on being a music educator altogether, I was re-introduced to handbells. During the next 18 years, the following watershed moments occurred which highlighted to me the concepts of equal access, agency, emotional awareness, and musical development that ensemble handbell ringing can afford. These and many other experiences since, have led to my dedication to the advancement of the instrument’s use
in music education, as well as my desire to create a higher standard of musicianship within the field.

In 2000, I attended my first national conference sponsored by what was then referred to as the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (now the Handbell Musicians of America), in Hartford, CT. It was at that event that I first began to experience the rich and varied culture of handbell ensemble ringing. It was also there that I saw a concert featuring the “Joybells” from the Melmark School of Berwyn, PA, a residential treatment facility for young adults with developmental disabilities. I cried through the entire performance, because I realized how the handbell provided the most powerful musical tool I had ever seen in the hands of students with Downs Syndrome. Regardless of intellectual capacity, their music was just as perfectly pitched as that of the professional handbell ensemble I had heard the night before. Because handbells are never sharp or flat, they provide a consistent positive sonic experience for those who engage with them. Knowing just how “equally” beautiful their sound was, the members rang with a clear sense of empowerment and pride. I began to cry as I realized the potency that the instrument possessed for those beautiful young people. My mind immediately began to dream about the possibilities for other disenfranchised populations. This was also the moment that I realized how important this instrument would become in my life; it was the instrument capable of delivering an experience that combines musical excellence and personal empowerment. At this concert, I became convinced I had discovered gold.

I remember returning to my classroom from that conference energized and full of new ideas. I began noticing how the uniqueness of the instrument attracted students of all
types of learning abilities, including those with Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. It was amazing to see how those students excelled at ringing because the instrument engaged the body—something my students expressed frustration about with regard to their cognitive-based classes. They were consistently some of my best ringers, handling some of the more complex movement combinations required by their parts. They loved ringing, stayed engaged throughout a 45-minute class, and experienced a sense of accomplishment and personal competency that was missing from their classroom experiences in many of their other subjects.

In 2003, I took my students on tour and one of our first concerts was at the Florida Baptist Children’s Home in Lakeland, FL where we rang for an audience of orphaned teens. At first, the teens poured into the gymnasium and sat against the back wall leaving at least 100 feet between us. Within a half hour of performing, they had closed the gap and were sitting within feet of my music stand. Following the concert, the residents were eager to try malleting the handbells and to meet my students. We had the opportunity to have some meaningful conversation with people whose lives were completely different than our own. The instrument’s disarming effect had drawn those youth into a safe space where significant human connection could take place. Ten years later I experienced a similar reaction and interaction with disenfranchised youth after a concert we performed at the Alachua Juvenile Detention Center in Gainesville, FL.

During our preparation for the 2013 Florida tour, one of my students shared with me that she could not stop humming one of our pieces while she was at home that weekend. While this is not an unusual occurrence, it is significant to understand that this
student had only participated for one year, had no other music learning experience other than handbells, and the piece was 180 measures with 118 meter changes. I witnessed how participation with handbells had helped her to develop as a person, and also to grow her musical skills; she physically experienced mixed and asymmetric meters and performed them quite musically in a relatively short amount of time.

In these and many other watershed moments I experienced teaching handbells, I have come to understand that handbells are unique in that they create sound as a result of body movement, and musical expression is dependent upon the movement capabilities of the musicians. Because the instrument’s musical response is sensitive to movement, handbells essentially encourage and require the body to be musical. Otherwise, the instrument produces sound, but not necessarily musical sound. I have never been more convinced that this unique instrument and practice can provide the field of music education with a viable option that meets the needs of a diverse student body, and fulfills a number of the values for which contemporary music education currently advocates such as creating, performing, responding, and connecting (NAfME, 2014b).

**Rationale: How Music Education Has Traditionally Disenfranchised the Body**

In this section, I offer a critique of music education, in order to demonstrate that pre-service education, the national standards, and music education philosophy have all tended to promote a cognitive approach to music making that disenfranchises the body. This is important to highlight here in contrast to “embodied” or “whole-body” handbell ringing (Westcott, 1962), which is the type of handbell ringing that is the focus of this research.
As I explain in greater detail below, handbell ringing started to shift to a more embodied practice during the 1980s due to the influence of David Davidson (T. Waugh, personal communication, 2015). The larger field of music education has been slower to integrate the body as it is still largely based upon traditional Western concepts that separate the body and mind (Matthews, 1994). In pre-service teacher education, this is evidenced by the list of competencies published by the MENC Commission on Teacher Education in 1972 (See Appendix A), which included personal qualities, musical qualities, and professional qualities, recommended as the basis for granting certification to music teachers (MENC, 1972). None of these standards alluded to competency in embodied performance or movement training. Rather they express a cerebral approach to music comprehension and performance. While musical expression is the subject of number six, “organize sounds for personal expression,” the description seems awkward with use of the word “organization.” This seems to imply a cognitive pathway to expressivity rather than one that imagines the embodiment of musical forces. While others use verbs like perform, play, sing, conduct, or demonstrate there is no explicit indication that the body is central to enacting these competencies. If that were the case, one would expect to see statements like “perform with musical understanding, technical proficiency, and gestural manifestations of the music being performed.”

The same critique can be made concerning the 1994 National Music Standards (NAfME, 1994) (See Appendix B). Richerme (2015) pointed out that they “make no mention of the words emotion or body,” and went on to critique the articles in the Journal for Research in Music Education for a clear emphasis upon “music cognition
separate from the other three facets,” which include embodiment, emotion, and sociality (p. 83).

The *National Core Arts Standards* introduced in 2014 that replaced the 1994 Standards, show only a subtle improvement in terms of the inclusion of embodiment. These standards claim to “cultivate a student’s ability to carry out the three artistic processes of creating, performing, and responding” (NAfME, 2017), but still largely focus on music literacy through conceptual understandings rather than the acquisition of knowledge and skills through embodied learning (NAfME, 2017). While the standards of creating, performing and responding might indicate more room for embodied learning, “the standards emphasize conceptual understanding” processes “that musicians have followed for generations” (NAfME, 2017, n.p.).

On February 18, 2014, NAfME demonstrated a somewhat more inclusive when it announced Broader-Minded™. Conforming with the Department of Education’s *Partnership for 21st Century Skills* (National Education Association, 2007), it advocated for the under-recognized benefits of music education, and represented a significant step in the advancement of a holistic approach to music education. “Today we officially announce that the National Association for Music Education has fundamentally reinvented the manner in which we teach, promote, and conduct music education advocacy” (NAfME, 2014a). A component of Broader-
Minded™. “Beyond the Bubbles” included “decision-making, grit, multiple ways of knowing, creativity, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, emotional awareness, reflective learning, and process orientation” (NAfME, n.y., n.p.). The language of the webpage’s introductory paragraph indicates room for an embodied approach: “Music not only impacts academic achievement, it also shapes the way our students understand themselves and the world around them. Let’s think beyond the bubbles™ and educate the whole student” (NAfME, n.y., n.p.). Educating the whole student cannot happen without addressing issues of the body, nor can we understand ourselves and the world around us without an embodied orientation. While the goals of this initiative could provide NAfME with an avenue for expanding its scope of pedagogical trajectories to include embodied music learning, the choice of “Broader Minded,” and its logo—brain matter surrounding the word “music”—still implies a cognitive focus in music education (NAfME, 2014a).

Perhaps it is not a surprise that pre-service teacher criteria, national standards, and initiatives typically omit an embodied approach to music making considering the traditional music education philosophies that have shaped them. Both the music as aesthetic education (Reimer, 1989), and praxial approaches (Elliot, 2007) are based upon a Cartesian view that separates the mind from the body and privileges the cognitive. This can be seen in the aesthetic approach of Reimer (1989), who does speak about music itself being embodied, but that it is a “complex function of the mind” (p. 83). Of Elliot’s praxial approach, Bowman (2000) stated that it “needs a more decisive, explicit break from idealism and the cognitivist theories of consciousness and mind that are its legacy”
(p. 45). He went on to state that Elliott rightly took a “materialist orientation to mind, musical cognition, and ‘self-hood,’” but misse[d] the body and embodiment as its starting point (Bowman, 2000, p. 45). He further noted that Elliott used phrases like “multidimensional cognitive challenges,” “procedural knowledge,” “knowing in action,” and “processing patterns of auditory information, but in the end, Elliott’s references to reason far outnumbered that of the body (Bowman, 2000, p. 46).

Bowman (2000) has made the recognition of the “bodily roots of cognition” (p. 46) in music education his professional life’s work. He said, “The body is oriented to action. It is, in fact, the fundamental vehicle of all human agency. And it seems to me that this obliges any account of ‘musicing’ or musical engagement to explicitly account for the ways the body informs and enables such musical doings” (Bowman, 2000, p. 46).

Bowman (2004) went on to explain that:

Cognitivist theory fails to account adequately for the emotional component of human intelligence, for intelligent action, for creativity, or for the intuitive resources that guide them all. From the standpoint of music and music education, these are profound shortcomings. (p. 36)

With so little emphasis or inclusion of embodied learning in the policies and philosophy of music education generally, a study of “embodied” or “whole-body handbell ringing” may offer deeper understandings of embodied learning that could prove helpful as the profession strives for a more expansive approach to music learning that includes a greater emphasis upon reflection and emotional awareness. Furthermore, studying embodied learning in group contexts could provide insight into the ways that
music learning might foster improved communication, collaboration, and group problem-solving, as well as ways music educators might make music learning more accessible to all learners.

The Research Problem: Why Consider Handbells?

Scholarship is ripe with the musical and non-musical benefits of general music education (Adderley & Berz, 2003); instrumental music (Allsup, 2003); and choral music (Kennedy, 2016). However, the same cannot be said of handbells. In a 1962 Music Educators Journal article, Westcott stated,

The professional musician is inclined to dismiss this offbeat musical practice as being too far removed from traditional music making to be worthy of notice. To be sure, handbells have accumulated no musical literature; in fact, printed recognition of their very existence as a musical instrument will be hard to find. (p. 109)

With regard to scholarship and the instrument’s possible orientation in music education, this statement describes the prevalent view of handbell practice at the time of this study. Handchimes have been studied and credited with therapeutic benefits in the elderly (Skingley & Bungay, 2010), but it is difficult to find scholarly research that describes the unique experiences of handbell musicians in performance and educational settings.

Therefore, I set out to study three aspects of ensemble handbell ringing that distinguish it from other music making opportunities, and the possible ways handbell musicians experience these phenomena:

1. Embodiment, embodied learning, or the unified holistic experience of whole-
body music making;

2. Musical communitas (simultaneous autonomous responsibility and collective orientation); and

3. Accessibility of the instrument as seen through the lens of universal design.

**Embodiment and embodied learning.** Handbell ringing provides a unique opportunity for musical embodiment or whole-body music making. For the purposes of this study I define “embodiment” as the experience and expression of music as felt through whole-body movement. “Reciprocally, the movements express what the participants hear, feel, understand, and know” (Juntunen, 2016, p. 142). Similarly, “embodied learning” is knowledge that is obtained through bodily movement, which provides a means for developing skills, competencies and understandings (Juntunen & Hyvönen, 2004). Therefore, embodied music learning refers to music knowledge including skills, competencies, and understanding that are obtained through embodied music practice.

“Whole-body” musical activity is defined as music making that incorporates the entire body from a standpoint that the human body is the instrument and the handbell is a resonating extension of it. Through my work as a handbell clinician and speaking with hundreds of people, I have discovered that musicians that play other instruments speak about “joining with” their instrument to create music—that there is a sense of “togetherness with” the instrument. Handbell musicians, on the other hand, speak about being “one with” the instrument—that handbells are experienced as an extension of a musician’s physicalness. Handbells are not felt as separate things from the body; the
handles seem to melt into the musician’s hands as the body performs the music. In this sense, whole-body music making through ensemble ringing provides a unique condition for embodied learning, and the quest for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon is one of the motivating forces behind this study.

When Westcott penned his article in 1962, the concepts of “embodied” or “whole-body handbell ringing” did not exist. One handbell musician considered to be a pillar of the art form considers the idea of embodied handbell ringing—although not labeled as such—as having emerged in the 1980s under the direction of the late David Davidson (T. Waugh, personal communication, 2015). Traditional handbell ringing differs from embodied ringing in that the former focuses on the bell itself as a beautiful and unique musical artifact. The “ringer” is seen in a subordinate role as the producer of the instrument’s sound (M. Joy, personal communication, 2015). In embodied ringing, however, the handbell musician’s body is viewed as the primary instrument with the bell seen as a resonant extension thereof (Strepka, 2012). To better understand this approach to handbell ringing, a focus upon embodiment is warranted. Therefore, the concepts of embodied handbell ringing and embodied learning will provide a conceptual framework to guide the interpretation of the musicians’ individual musical experience.

Musical communitas. Ensemble ringing not only invites embodiment, but also requires its participants to function as a whole unit with each participant’s contribution being subsumed into one collective musical expression. O’Grady (2011) provides us with a phrase that helps to capture the simultaneous experience of embodiment and collective musical expression; the potential to experience individual autonomy and unity at the
same time through music is often referred to by community music therapists as “musical communitas.”

In the 1960s, anthropologist Victor Turner, coined the term “communitas” to describe a phenomenon that “has to do with the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full” (Turner, 2012, p. 1). Communitas refers to a state of being with others “that makes any environment possible” (Turner, 2012, p. xi). Turner suggests that it cannot be replicated through institutionalization or commercialization, and once individuals become familiar with how it feels, they regard it as “necessary for survival” (Turner, 2012, p. xii).

In communitas there is a loss of ego. One’s pride in oneself becomes irrelevant. In the group, all are in unity, seamless unity, so that even joshing is cause for delight and there is a lot of laughter. The benefits of communitas are quick understanding, easy mutual help, and long-term ties with others. (Turner, 2012, p. 3)

This seemed a compatible and powerful paradigm for music therapists who soon adopted a form of communitas—musical communitas. “By musical communitas, I (and many of the writers [sic]) mean to suggest the particular possibilities and qualities of social and cultural experience motivated and sustained through music and musicing” (Ansdell, 2004, p. 88). This model reflects what is possible through the practice of ensemble handbell ringing. Therefore, the concept of musical communitas will be used to interpret and understand the simultaneous experience of personal autonomy and collective musical expression during handbell ringing.
Accessibility. The third distinct aspect of handbell ensemble ringing that was studied herein is that of accessibility. There is agreement within the handbell community that while handbells are easy to ring, they also require a high level of skill to play artistically (Strepka, 2012), (Ann, personal communication, 2015), (Kelly, personal communication, 2015), (Bryan, personal communication, 2015). That said, the nature of the instrument lends itself to inclusivity, as its design is a two-dimensional clapper system housed within a handheld, tuned resonator, which allows persons with differing levels of physical and intellectual ability to produce sound.

To better understand how handbells might be more accessible than other instruments, I will consider physical accessibility through the concept of universal design (See Chapter Three), but will also examine social accessibility (having the opportunity to join a group of musicians in one’s community) and, musical accessibility (having the opportunity to join a musical ensemble with no skill prerequisite required) (Avedikian, 1983). Therefore, the threefold purpose of this study is to understand handbell musicians’ perceptions of embodiment or the whole-body sensations experienced during ringing, the collective experience that happens as bodies communicate and function as one instrument, and the unique characteristics of ensemble ringing that afford avenues of accessibility.

Research Questions

The questions that directly guided this study were:

1. What are handbell musicians’ perceptions of embodied handbell ringing and/or embodied learning?
2. What are handbell musicians’ perceptions of functioning as one unified instrument?

3. How are handbells unique with regard to their accessibility?

**Organization and Description of the Study**

Chapter One presented my Personal Context to the study, the Rationale, and Research Problem. The three phenomena of embodiment and embodied learning, musical communitas, and accessibility, were also presented, along with the research questions.

Chapter Two is an introduction to handbells and the ringing community, which I have included to provide context and a better understanding of handbell culture. This section is included for those not previously acquainted with handbell ringing and the content may be needful to better understand the participants’ stories. Sections include why the handbell was developed, the evolution of ringing in the United States, handbell production, ringing basics, and the instrument’s ongoing transformation.

In Chapter Three, I provide a review of research on embodied learning, musical communitas, and accessibility that supports this research. In Chapter Four, I provide a rationale for the use of phenomenological methods, detailed the design of the study, as well as included information about the data collection and analysis procedures.

In Chapter Five, I include a report of the findings. The emergent themes are organized and presented as they pertain to the threefold areas of purpose in this study: embodiment, musical communitas, and accessibility. Unrelated findings and a small instance of conflicting data are also discussed.

Finally, in Chapter Six I offer a discussion with connections to previous research,
implications for music education, and suggestions for future research.
Chapter Two: An Introduction to Handbells and the Handbell Community

The more they ring the better they like it.—Arthur H. Nichols (Shurcliff, 1959, p. 5)

This chapter was written with great pride, respect, and sentimentality for an instrument that can be easily overlooked and greatly misunderstood. My hope is that readers who are unfamiliar with handbells will be inspired to learn more, and that veteran handbell musicians will be reminded of the unique path that brought us from Vaudeville to the symphony stage.

In the Beginning

The Chinese “are thought to have begun experimenting with bells of jade and other stones as early as the Neolithic period,” and by 1200 B.C. they were casting bells in bronze (Rostoker, Bronson & Dvorak, 1984, p. 750). In the West, and as early as the fifth century, “It is known that St. Patrick used a small handbell to call early Christians to worship, the bell therefore pre-dating church buildings” (Whitechapel Bell Foundry, 2011, p. 2). During the 12th century, it became customary to have bells hung in towers in
all English villages to tell the time of day and to call people to worship. At first, these enormous bells were rung using ropes and levers, but around the year 1600 the development of the wheel and pulley method (which is still used today) gave the ringers more control over the timing of the sound (North American Guild of Change Ringers, n.d.). However, these early performances were merely descending major scales that soon became dull, so the English invented the more imaginative change ringing — ringing bells in various mathematical patterns.

Here in the United States change ringing is still alive and well, where it all began, in Boston. The oldest set of change ringing bells in North America, cast in 1744, can be found at Old North Church. “In the ringing room today hangs a copy of a 1750 charter in which the guild agreed upon a democratic organization of the tower. Interestingly, Paul Revere is the second signature on that contract” (Old North Church, 2016). The bells were most recently restored in 1975, and have been rung regularly ever since. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Guild of Bellringers, along with volunteer ringers of all ages from around the Boston area, still ring following the 11:00 AM church service (Old North Church, 2016).

The Need for a More Accessible Bell

Change ringing, which is more complex than scales, required extensive practice in damp and drafty towers. Rehearsals, when held in the early morning or at night, disturbed the townspeople. “These disadvantages led to the development of handbells so the ringers could practice their changes in a more comfortable setting without disturbing the village. These rehearsals were held in homes, churches, or even the local pub” (Thompson, 2010,
The first tuned handbells were developed by brothers Robert and William Cor in Aldbourne, Wiltshire, England, between 1696 and 1724” (Markey, 1997, p. 36). Eventually, the ringers realized that handbells could produce beautiful music, which is something that change ringing could not.

The Evolution of Handbell Ringing in the United States

Musicologist Richard Lehmann (2001) identified three major phases in the evolution of handbell ringing over the last century and a half. He calls the first phase Vaudeville ringing which lasted from the 1840s to the early 1900s. These early ensembles were novelty acts with the literature and costumed-performers reflecting the popular entertainment of the day. Although circus owner, PT Barnum, was thought to be the first person to bring handbells to the United States, there is evidence in the New York Times that the Peak Family Ringers probably introduced

Figure 4. Peak Family Ringers, circa 1840, photo courtesy of Buff Huntley

Figure 5. NY Times Excerpt, 1885
handbell ringing into the United States in the 1830s (Thompson, 2010). Figures 4 and 5 show a NY Times article and a surviving concert ticket that confirms they were performing in 1839.

Lehmann’s (2001) second phase is called domestic social ringing and it lasted from the early 1900s to the end of World War II. This phase is exemplified by the expansion of community groups originating in the Boston area whose purpose was more recreational and social than performance-driven. At this point, handbell music was still unpublished and arranged by the groups themselves. The most prominent figure during this time was Margaret Shurcliff, who was the first American woman to ring a peal on tower bells in England, and was presented in 1902 with a set of Whitechapel handbells to bring back to the United States (Thompson, 2010). She organized the Beacon Hill Ringers who rang on Beacon Hill in Boston during the Christmas season. “She continued to introduce her friends to handbell ringing into the United States in the 1830s

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Figure 6. Peak Family Ringers concert ticket

Figure 7. Margaret Shurcliff and her Beacon Hill Ringers, photo courtesy of the Boston Public Library
ringing and handbell ‘bands’ soon became popular throughout New England” (Thompson, 2010, p. 5). In 1937, Margaret and several other handbell enthusiasts formed the New England Guild of English Handbell Ringers (NEGEHR).

Lehmann’s (2001) third phase, institutional ringing, represents current interest on the part of churches in incorporating handbells in worship services and on the part of schools where bell choirs constitute music ensembles. “By the early 1950s, handbell ringing was scattered across the United States,” and in 1954 the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR) was formed (Thompson, 2010, p. 7). “The AGEHR held its first festival at the Crane Mansion on Castle Hill in Ipswich, MA. Despite having difficulty recruiting 26 participants, the minimum number required by the Mansion for a meeting, 700 to 800 people turned out for a Saturday evening concert. This number far exceeded the anticipated 300 people for whom chairs were set up” (Thompson, 2010, p. 7). By the late 50s the Guild began to realize that they had become a national organization, and by 1971 they had divided their membership into 12 areas. Since then the AGEHR, which has been doing business as the “Handbell Musicians of America” since 2010, has grown to a membership of approximately 7,000 directors.

Mission: “Handbell Musicians of America is dedicated to advancing the musical art of handbell/handchime ringing through education, community and communication.”

Vision: “Uniting people to create a diverse community in which handbell musicians of every skill level realize their full potential through a musically-respected art form” (Handbell Musicians of America, 2016, n.p.).
At the time of this study, Handbell Musicians of America offered a variety of learning events, locally, regionally, and nationally, as well as a number of different scholarships that assist people in getting to those events. The International Handbell Committee planned a bi-yearly event called the International Handbell Symposium where handbell ringers from all over the world gather to participate and exchange cultures through the art of handbell ringing:

The principal purpose for the International Handbell Symposium was to promote the flourishing of communication between nations, the spreading of handbells as art, and to extend the spirit of world peace through music. The first International Handbell Symposium was held from August 13–17, 1984 at the Humboldt State University, in Arcata, California. It has been held every two years since then. The event regularly attracts some 600–800 participants from all over the world. The original spirit and intention continue as people seek to enhance international relationships through their love of this unique musical instrument—handbells.

(Soundings, 2016, p. 13)

Figure 8. Diagram of a Schulmerich Handbell, from VanValey & Berry, 1988
Handbell Production

As late as the 1950s, the majority of handbells were still produced in England. The American company, Schulmerich Carillons, Inc., began mass-producing English handbells in the United States in 1963. Jacob Malta, designer of the Schulmerich handbell, opened his own handbell business, Malmark, Inc. in 1974. An English handbell is characterized by three physical characteristics: its tuning (dominant fundamental and 12th overtone), a clapper that swings through a single plane, and a restraining spring that prevents the clapper from resting on the inside of the casting (VanValey & Berry, 1988). Handbells are cast of pure bronze in the approximate proportions of 80% copper and 20% tin. The metal is heated in crucibles to 2,150° F in modern electric furnaces and then poured into sand molds. After the bronze has hardened, the sand is broken away and the raw casing is roto-blasted to remove burnt-in molding sand and scale. It is then sent to the lathe department for turning and tuning (Malmark Bellcraftsmen, 2016a).
When rung, a handbell produces a fundamental pitch (strike tone) and a set of overtones. An English handbell is tuned so that the most prominent overtone is the fifth, or technically, an octave and a fifth (or a 12th) above the fundamental. The fundamental is largely determined by the diameter of the lip and wall thickness, while the overtones are controlled by the profile (or shape) of the bell.

The Basics

Handbells are played in sets. The most common sets are two octaves (G4–G6), three octaves (C4–C7), four octaves (G3–G7), five octaves (C3–C8), six octaves (G2–G8), and seven octaves (C2–C9). Although they require music specifically arranged for them, smaller sets are available. Handbell music is written for ranges of bells such as two–three octaves, three–five octaves, or five–seven octaves. Handbells are identified by pitch and octave. For example, C5 is scored the same as middle C on a piano. However, handbells are a transposing instrument, so C5 is read one ledger line above the bass clef but heard one octave higher.

![Figure 11. Pitch designation for Three-octaves of handbells, from VanValey & Berry, 1988](image)

Handbells are arranged on padded and covered tables, generally in piano keyboard order (from the ringers’ perspective) with the accidentals offset just like keys on a piano—one bell per pitch.
Some exceptions to this rule include low bass bells or bells used in solo or small ensemble ringing. In those situations, bells are ordered and arranged for maximum ease of performance. Bells can be assigned to ringers using a number of different methods, but the most common method of assignment is to give each ringer two diatonic pitches and corresponding accidentals. Figure 13 shows an example of bell assignments for a three-octave ensemble and the resulting designation of “positions 1–11.” Some variables that can affect bell assignments include the number of ringers available to cover the number of octaves being played, as well as the difficulty and tempo of the music.
Handbells can be sounded using a number of different techniques including but not limited to: ring/damp, shake, mallet, and martellato. Gloves were traditionally worn by ringers as to not get oils from hands on the castings, or because it added to a sense of uniformity in church ensembles, much in the same ways as choir robes. (J. Walters, personal communication, December 7, 2016). However, there is a segment of the handbell community, including those who practice embodied performance, that have moved away from wearing gloves because they prevent musicians from making close contact with the instrument or create a barrier between the body and the handle.

In 1982 Malmark created the Choirchime®, the first American handchime instrument (Malmark Bellcraftsmen, 2016b). Handchimes are tuned square tubes with an external clapper system. Handchimes provide an economical and durable option for introducing children to ringing. Handchimes are also used by even the most advanced handbell ensembles to add contrast in timbre, as chimes have a mellower sound than handbells. Malmark’s low bass chimes (C2–B2) also provide an economical alternative to five-octave handbell ensembles that wish to add the lower sixth and seventh octaves to their sound but cannot afford the handbell equivalent.

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1 Video demonstration of basic handbell techniques, https://youtu.be/EijOMsghos
**Ongoing Transformation**

The art of English handbell ringing, once viewed as a novelty, has continually undergone development. Not only have Malmark and Schulmerich continued to make advancements in the quality and function of their designs, but the mission of the art of ringing has changed considerably in the past 20 to 30 years. For example, early handbell choirs had a limited range because bronze bass bells were expensive and quite heavy, some weighing in excess of 18 pounds. However, in 1992, “Malmark introduced a new concept in handbell design and performance through aluminum castings of its bass bells. This change not only reduced the weight to about half that of the bronze bells, but it also provided a strong fundamental tone. This made it practical and musically desirable to expand the range of bass bells down to G♯ [G♯ in standard piano designation]” (Malmark Bellcraftsmen, 2016c). The new aluminum design made virtuosic ringing and advanced-level bass writing more practical. As a result, what was once viewed as a Vaudevillian act has matured into an art form that produces ensembles capable of playing original literature, as well as transcriptions of sophisticated classical literature.

An example of virtuosic literature written for handbells that has provided the greater music public with exposure to the instrument is Kevin McChesney’s *Ring of Fire Concerto for Handbell Choir and Orchestra* (McChesney, 2001). Other than this piece,
most major commissions occur for holiday pops concerts, and therefore the majority of
pieces written for handbells and full orchestra are Christmas arrangements. As a result,
handbells have become a featured instrument during the month of December, but many in
the handbell community are striving to expand the prevalence and acceptance of handbell
music to occasions throughout the year.

This continual transformation can be seen in the constantly evolving pedagogies
that aim to increase artistic potential, in the continual development of new techniques that
create sounds we never thought possible, and in the continual publication of increasingly
more virtuosic repertoire. Seventy years ago, handbell publishing, as an industry, was
non-existent (J. Behnke, personal communication, August 8, 2017), while at the time of
this study, the handbell community had access to music from 14 publishers (Handbell
Musicians of America, 2017c). Transformation is so constant that every five to seven
years a “Notation Conference” is held wherein publishers, composers, and anyone else
interested in the process, gather to formalize the acceptance or rejection of new
techniques and how they should be notated (Handbell Musicians of America, 2017b).

Handbell ringing is a highly collaborative art form where an extremely high
percentage of the medium’s composers (since the inception of handbell publishing) are
currently alive, reachable, and willing to answer questions about their compositions. This
gives music making in the handbell community, what I would refer to as, a cultural
neology (Svenningsen, 2013)—an idiomatic art form that is created in real time.
Chapter Three: The Power of Communicating Bodies

Although Blacking (1973) cautions that these connections are neither direct or deterministic, he suggests that shared musical actions — what we are calling bodies in states of music — may be “as close as anyone can ever get to resonating with another person.” (Bowman & Powell, 2007, pp. 1097–1098)

The Intelligible Body

The movement of our bodies is the basis of functional and expressive life. It is through our bodily experience that we create meaning. Therefore, our bodies are “humanity’s common denominator. They are our common bond” (Studd & Cox, 2015, p. 15). But what can, and does, the body know? Many philosophers and educators including Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), and most notably in current music education literature, Wayne Bowman, have advocated for an intelligible body that is not dualistic in its essence from the brain. Davidson (2004) describes bodily knowledge as a body-mind relationship that is based in the “deeply connected paths of knowing, where body and mind intersect and become entangled” (p. 198). Bowman speaks prolifically about the “inseparability of mind and body” and the “corporeal roots” of human knowledge (2004, p. 30–31) “Mind is inextricably biological and embodied; and what it can know is always grounded in the material and experiential world” (Bowman, 2004, p. 30).

Three bodies. Davidson (2004) says that our bodies fulfill at least three different functions in our roles as human beings. At the most basic level it is the individual and physical body—the body-self, “the means by which knowledge is ‘held’ in the body as a
somatic artifact” (Davidson, 2004, p. 199). The next level is the social body which mediates the outside world through the use of posture, gesture, clothing and other symbolic meanings (Davidson, 2004). Oliver (2008) states that “… our conception of our bodies and of ourselves is a response to the movement of energy in our environment, most particularly social energy generated in our relationships with other people” (p. 141). Our bodies are social bodies that need others to make sense of self more than we realize. Lastly, our bodies are political, which refers to how our bodies are “disciplined by society, in order to shape our knowledge, behavior, and compliance,” such as how children’s bodies are disciplined to sit, walk in lines, and raise their hands (Davidson, 2004, p. 200).

**Embodied selfhood.** Our bodies are foundational to life—selfhood, social agent, political conformist—but is the body actually intelligent? Neurologist, Oliver Sacks (1933–2015), brought attention to the depths of the cognitive processes throughout the corpus of his work with his patients. More recently, researchers such as Kontos (2014) have taken a non-cerebral approach to understanding dementia, selfhood and music, looking to the “intelligibility of the body” for answers (Kontos, 2014, p. 117). Like Sacks, Kontos is uncomfortable with expressions like “loss of self,” “unbecoming,” and “unbeing” and contends that “the naturalization of brain-self coupling is critical, since it is implicated in the formation and practice of dehumanizing persons with dementia …” (p. 111). Thus, she provides a rationale for a non-cerebral, embodied selfhood that develops through engagement with the world. “[T]he key to the seemingly inexplicable coherent and spontaneous expressions of musicality that emerge from the depths of
dementia is to be found in the body’s own primordial potential and sociocultural significance that sustain selfhood at a pre-reflective level” (Kontos, 2014, p. 111). In other words, “embodied selfhood is premised on a pre-reflective notion of agency that resides below the threshold of cognition and is manifest primarily in corporeal ways” (Kontos, 2014, p. 112). Through this lens, selfhood persists even with severe dementia, as seen in such acts as religious and artistic practices, dislike of particular foods, and bodily inclinations that express the prior vocation of persons with dementia (Kontos, 2014).

Kontos (2014) calls upon Merleau-Ponty’s example of typing, as an activity that is learned and retained in the body pre-reflectively. A typist, “to make any attempt to provide a reflective and discursive account of the keyboard layout, would have to imagine typing in order to see the direction in which his or her fingers move to hit the appropriate keys. Knowledge of typing, Merleau-Ponty argues, is in the hands and manifests itself only when bodily effort is made and cannot be articulated in detachment from that effort” (Kontos, 2014, p. 114). The kind of knowledge the typist has of the keyboard is a “practical, embodied knowledge, quite remote and distinct from discursive knowledge” (Kontos, 2014, p. 114).

In Kontos’ study, just as the keyboard becomes incorporated into the typist’s bodily schema, the dementia patients’ ability to engage in musicality is based in a bodily form of consciousness (Kontos, 2014). Dispositions and forms of know-how that are learned by the body but cannot be explicitly articulated are those that do not “pass through consciousness” but rather are “enacted at a pre-reflective level” (Kontos, 2014, p. 113). Because of this, musicality remains intact for those with dementia because
embodied selfhood in this manner resides “below the threshold of cognition” (Kontos, 2014, p. 115). The body therefore, at its deepest level, holds within it intelligence, which testifies to its foundational, not subordinate, status.

**Virtual living’s disintegration of the minded-body.** The devaluation of the importance of bodily interaction and communication with others due to the prevalence of virtual technology is a growing concern. Grandiosity and solipsism (lack of awareness of literal others) result from games where players are the rulers of universes with no sense of responsibility for others (Emig, 2001). “Both grandiosity and solipsism can be regarded as subsets of anti-social traits and behaviors” (Emig, 2001, p. 277). Another effect of cyber space over embodied space is that users “may begin to prefer the virtual over the actual … Or they may suffer from the ultimate confusion: not being able to discern the difference between the two” (Emig, 2001, p. 277). Emig (2001), speaks directly about the importance of the embodied classroom, as it remains one of the last sites for socialization available in our society. It’s a place where students are required to acknowledge human complexity, situational ambiguity, and even unanswerable questions about self and society. The embodied classroom is a place to learn tolerance of another who will not go away with the press of a button. “The embodied classroom invites students to know themselves in ways only interaction with others can provide. The embodied classroom re-introduces students to the joys and inevitability of human pace, crucial if they are to find satisfaction with partners, children, elders, colleagues, themselves” (p. 280). Learning that happens through one body interacting with another body invites sympathetic reaction such as tolerance and a sensitivity to another’s life
tempo.

Understanding the importance of the body in the formation of self-hood, personal growth, preservation of sympathetic reaction, and socio-cultural cues lays the important groundwork necessary in examining the potency of communicating bodies making music together. Before we shift into the potency of bodies making music together, a look at the body’s role in music cognition is in order.

**The body and music cognition.** Because western society has been steeped in Cartesian thought since the 17th century, music and cognition has been researched and written about prolifically. Most of the scholarship has been based in how the brain analyzes and parses musical stimuli. Bowman (2004), however, offers a second model of cognition that is embodied and based in the corporeality of our interaction with the world. Bowman (2004) describes the two models of music cognition as such: the first is a traditional paradigm where the brain analyzes music, and the second is a body-based model wherein brain activity is a result of the body’s engagement with music.

The representational model of music cognition “reduces music perception and cognition to the mental manipulation of set of syntactical implications (e.g. Meyer) or formal hierarchies (e.g. Lerdahl & Jackendoff)” (Bowman, 2004, p. 34). The body essentially sends raw data to the brain to be analyzed. The brain is then credited with transforming, processing, and representing the data into music cognition (Bowman, 2004). There is an implied separation of the body from the cognitive function, with the body fulfilling a lower-order, subordinate role in the process.

What cognitivist-based theory fails to adequately address is “the emotional
component of human intelligence, intelligent action, for creativity, or for the intuitive resources that guide them all. From the standpoint of music and music education, these are profound shortcomings” (Bowman, 2004, p. 36).

In our determination to substantiate the educational value of music and the arts, I am suggesting, we have accepted uncritically notions of ‘knowing’ and ‘understanding’ crafted in other domains: notions whose inadequacy as arguments for the arts stems from deficiencies equally profoundly inadequate to their domains of origin. As a result we find ourselves advocating music study for reasons that fit with prevailing ideological assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the aims of schooling, but on which we are ill-equipped to deliver, and that neglect what may be most distinctive about music: its roots in experience and agency, the bodily and the social. Our most revered justifications of music education are built upon deeply-flawed notions about mind, cognition, and intelligence. (Bowman, 2004, p. 33)

What Bowman (2004) is suggesting is a vastly different enactive perspective that sees cognition as “an activity emergent from, structured by, and never wholly separable from the material facts of bodily experience” (p. 36). All human knowledge is fed from corporeal roots because the mind is biological and embodied. The brain cannot know anything apart from what the body experiences in the world (Bowman, 2004). “[T]he mind is not in the brain, but in the vast network of neural interconnections that extend throughout the body. In this way, the body is in the mind. ... At the same time, the mind is in the body, in the sense that mind is coextensive with the body’s neural pathways and
the cognitive templates they comprise” (Bowman, 2004, p. 36). Therefore, an enactive embodied account of human cognition is the body, in a senior role, providing the brain with information in a co-constructive relationship. “Music is a valuable cognitive resource not because of what it teaches us about the disembodied metaphysical realm of feeling, but what it shows us about the profoundly embodied and socioculturally-situated character of all human knowing and being” (Bowman, 2004, p. 31). How does a disembodied brain account for partiality, multiplicity, complexity, and other phenomenological conditions involved in music making? Bowman (2004) concludes that the embodied mind’s “fluency at navigating such rough ground is precisely the heart of human genius” (p. 30).

Learning through the body is highly personal. With the body taking a foundational role in learning, research supports highly personal outcomes. I offer here, a sampling of research from different disciplines that advocate for embodied learning: music teacher training, the use of embodied modeling in the biology classroom, adult learning, and art education.

Music teacher education. Musikdidaktik is a method of music teacher education in Nordic countries that provides an arena for identity formation (Ferm, 2008). Central to this approach is the idea that the body-subject is the starting point for learning and identity formation, and that it implies a holistic view of teacher training that is still uncommon in higher education (Ferm, 2008). In this view, “learning is seen as a bodily action of perception and reflection (Ferm, 2008, p. 364), and that this type of embodied learning leads to “individual competencies such as ‘to be true’, to be present and
engaged, to be safe, brave, curious, aware about oneself, and to be experienced” (Ferm, 2008, p. 369). Being in touch with one’s body cultivates self-awareness; self-awareness invites personal growth outside one’s comfort zone.

Alerby and Ferm (2005) state: “learning is [sic] a process which leads to some kind of change, whose utmost purpose is—consciously or unconsciously—to create meaning and make managing the world possible (p. 177), and that “bodily experience is the foundation for learning” (p. 180). They draw upon Nørgaard-Nielsen (1998) to explain the relationship between learning music and the body, “to be able to play a piece of music the music instrument as well as the music itself has to be incorporated in the musician’s body. … [M]usic learning becomes knowledge when … the musical knowledge is in the body” (Alerby & Ferm, 2005, p. 181).

**Teaching biology through embodied modeling.** There is a sharp contrast between biology as studied in school settings and the practice of current biology research. Although they cover similar content, the processes involved in each setting bear little resemblance to each other (Wilensky & Reisman, 2006). “For most secondary and postsecondary biology students, the study of biology remains primarily an exercise in memorization” (Wilensky & Reisman, 2006, p. 174), and “even when students are exposed to research techniques in laboratory work, the emphasis is on following a prescribed procedure rather than reasoning from the evidence gathered in the procedure” (Wilensky & Reisman, 2006, p. 172).

In an attempt to rectify this contrast in processes, a study using a general-purpose modeling language and integrated environment known as NetLogo was conducted at
Tufts University. Students studied biological phenomena using classical equation-based approaches, as well as embodied modeling provided by NetLogo. Rather than making population-level assumptions, the students were asked to think like a wolf, a sheep, or a firefly (individual-level). Data showed that “the embodied modeling approach connects more directly to students’ experience, enables extended investigations as well as deeper understanding, and enables ‘advanced’ topics to be productively introduced into the high school curriculum” (Wilensky & Reisman, 2006, p. 171).

Wilensky and Reisman (2006) contend that not only does an embodied approach to studying biological phenomena provide a “greater predictive accuracy than their classical counterparts” (p. 192), but a stronger intuitive basis for students to understand each experiment, as well as “unify[ing] students’ understanding of biology as a whole” (p. 187). The ability to model individual behavior instead of aggregate behavior “enables students to use their personal experience with sensing and locomoting in the world as initial elements in their models of other organisms” (Wilensky & Reisman, p. 173). Asking students to think like a wolf, a sheep, or a firefly provides them with an opportunity for an embodied learning experience that challenges classical outcomes. Learning through the body provides a personal, deeper, more accurate, holistic learning experience.

**Adult learning.** Adult education, lifelong teaching and learning, is based in the concept of what it is to be a whole person. This is because adult learners bring their entire experiential selves—their experience, knowledge, and skills—to the classroom. In their research on embodied adult learning, Morris and Beckett (2004) drew upon evidence
from fieldwork conducted at two metropolitan institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). There they examined how adult learner identities present in the context of an adult English literacy classroom. What they discovered was that by “placing the body at the center of an analysis of subjectivity and literacy allows different questions to be raised about the self, the individual in relation to others, and literacy as socio-cultural practice” (Morris & Beckett, 2004, p. 125).

Morris and Beckett (2004) use Lankshear’s (1997) argument that traditional adult education is characterized by “spaces of enclosure—the book, the classroom, and the curriculum”:

These spaces work to enclose meaning and experience through a fixed curriculum that is transmitted in classrooms and where the book is the paradigmatic embodiment of truth. In this instance, the learners call this ‘space of enclosure’ into question. They question the assumption about the fixity of the text and the teacher as authoritative bearer of meaning. For these women, learning flourishes in the interstices of family, community, and work life and is shaped by their cultural, socio-economic, and historical circumstances. These adult learners do not re-present meaning, but rather collaborate in creating meaning, thus opening up the possibility of determining their own learning paths. (Morris & Beckett, 2004, p. 128)

Morris and Beckett’s (2004) data confirmed Lankshear’s (1997) argument in that the adult learners’ embodied (or experiential knowledge) challenged traditional classroom pedagogies. Instead the women, functioning through “active bodies,”
constructed and reconstructed their “sense of self” and occasionally resisted “other” constructions of themselves (Morris & Beckett, 2004). Knowing and understanding has typically been:

an achievement brought about by formal, abstract and immaterial means. For this, we have the Cartesian tradition to thank. Whilst its legacy is rich, it no longer serves as an adequate basis for the educational expectations generated by changing workplaces and life experiences. (Morris & Beckett, 2004, p. 130)

[However,] putting bodies at the center of adult learning corrects the Cartesian emphasis on metal criteria for knowing or understanding work experience and workplace culture. From an ontology that takes embodiment seriously, it is possible to construct a post-Cartesian epistemology centered upon a community of practice (that is authentic, embodied work); a dynamic (Aristotelian means-ends) engagement with diversity, power, and a variety of discourses; and a context which is well integrated with the wider environment. (Morris & Beckett, 2004, p. 129)

Art education. Art educators are also asking questions with regard to what constitutes learning, and the study of spontaneous and frequent embodied reactions to art are of interest. Embodied reactions to museum art manifest in sound effects, body gestures, and emotional reactions to the artwork. Researchers have asked if they are “passing, trivial manifestations? Or, do these embodied responses entail learning?” (Hubard, 2007, p. 47). Educators can intentionally facilitate embodied responses to works of art through discursive language such as imagining what it might feel like to be inside
the artwork—what would they hear, smell, and feel? (Hubard, 2007).

Another approach to eliciting embodied responses is through non-discursive activities that “can help activate, in particularly direct ways, the embodied ways of knowing that are so essential to aesthetic experience” (Hubard, 2007, p. 48). Embodied engagement with art can activate different physical and emotional ways of knowing in participants (Hubard, 2007). Activities that produce an immediate response are closely aligned with physical and emotional experiences. When asked to “become” a structure with their bodies, students begin to understand a building in relation to “human experiences of reaching, balancing, bridging, and being physically grounded” (Hubard, 2007, p. 50). Another activity involves creating a “soundtrack” for an artwork wherein they imagine sounds and “activate a sense other than sight as they apprehend the picture” (Hubard, 2007, p. 50).

Embodied responses are seen as a necessary element in a complete engagement with art. Does that mean then that embodied experiences constitute learning? “Embodied experiences do not only aid in the construction of knowledge; they also help make this knowledge meaningful” (Hubard, 2007, p. 51). Even in an art form where appreciation is acceptable in stoic, cerebral responses, educators desire the body to respond, else the engagement is not complete.

**The Potency of Communicating Bodies Making Music Together**

With an understanding of the body as primary receptor and communicator of knowledge, and an understanding of music cognition from an embodied perspective, I would like to raise the possibilities of communicating bodies making music together
through ensemble ringing. If learning happens as the body interacts with the world it could be said that music learning happens as the body interacts with the instrument (in this case, handbells) and fellow musicians. The body has been shown to be intelligent apart from the brain and learns music through physical engagement with instrument and its response to the body. This is in keeping with the enactive cognitive process advocated by Bowman (2004) wherein the body experiences the music and then the brain, in a sense, recognizes what the body already knows. Ensemble ringing provides a medium through which people can physically embody music, as well as join with others in a collective process of communicating musically through the body. The body engages physically with ensemble ringing on a corporeal level that allows for the development of musicianship beyond note recognition. As one person passes the musical line to the next, the receiver of the line must interpret and adjust his/her movements to create a seamless musical response. Moving through space and in conjunction with others in a musical setting provides the opportunity to experience the difference between expressive and utilitarian movement. Ensemble ringing puts the ringer in touch with his/her body, possibly in a new and more immediate way than they have experienced. That kind of self-discovery is a deeply necessary experience for musicians and non-musicians alike.

**Musical Communitas**

As previously stated, the potential to experience individual autonomy and unity at the same time through music is often referred to by community music therapists as “musical communitas” (O’Grady, 2011). This term grew out of anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept of “communitas” which he used to describe a phenomenon that “has to
do with the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning” (Turner, 2012, p. 1). “In communitas there is a loss of ego. One’s pride in oneself becomes irrelevant. In the group, all are in unity, seamless unity, so that even joshing is cause for delight and there is a lot of laughter. The benefits of communitas are quick understanding, easy mutual help, and long-term ties with others” (Turner, 2012, p. 3).

Ansdell (2004) provides a working definition of musical communitas, a term widely used in community music therapy, to be, “the particular possibilities and qualities of social and cultural experience motivated and sustained through music and musicing” (p. 88). To more fully grasp this concept, it may be helpful to understand its origins. Communitas is Latin for “of common,” and the modern word “community” is derived thereof. Community is thought to be “a locality and the people living there” or “a fellowship of interest and experience” (Stige, 2004, p. 93). It follows, then, that communitas is seen as “a common shared world of time, space, gesture and energy, which nevertheless allows diversity and unity” (Ansdell, 2004, p. 85). Within that shared world, “connection, changing identity, liminality and transformation” are probable (Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2004, p. 28) due to an “ease of social intimacy” (Ansdell, 2004, p. 88). In quoting Aigen (2001), communitas can be defined as providing the “comfort of a cultural home” (Ansdell, 2004, p. 88).

O’Grady (2011) provides a contrasting view of musical communitas as experienced by women in prison exposed to collaborative music making:

Musical communitas within group music-making is a fluid construction that is sometimes elusive. On the journey towards this ideal, some of the women
involved in this research, such as Gillian, sensed that their autonomy was threatened. This suggests that musical communitas was not a static achievement in this case; instead it ebbed and flowed as the journey progressed. Furthermore, the journey toward musical communitas can be fraught with infringements upon individual autonomy. (p. 144)

The perceived risk of loss of individual autonomy points back to the importance of vulnerability (or susceptibility) within the communitas of handbell ensemble ringing, and how the expectation of conformity may make some individuals uncomfortable. However, when one is willing to fully engage in communitas, it provides a ripe environment for personal growth. DeChaine (2002) said that we should regard communitas as a kind of venture—“an opportunity for reflection; a potential for change; a becoming; an instructive, collaborative energy that we breath (or scream) into each other’s ear. In the space of musical experience, we foment transformation” (p. 95).

**Accessibility**

The inclusive nature of ensemble ringing is due entirely to the design of the bells, which were invented centuries before the concept of “universal design” was ever envisioned. According to the Center for Universal Design (CUD) at North Carolina State University, universal design (UD) can be understood as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Burgstahler, 2015, p. 1). UD principles can also be applied to any product or environment, and therefore has been developed and utilized in the areas of “education, instruction, distance learning, software, libraries, student
services, professional organizations, projects, conference exhibits, presentations, and physical spaces” (Burgstahler, 2015, p. 3–4). The seven principles of UD place a high value on diversity, equality, and inclusiveness, and are as follows: “equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, size and space for approach and use” (Burgstahler, 2015, p. 2–3).

Universal design, adopted by educational reformers, has developed into universal design for learning (UDL), and is being used by some for the design of all instruction, not just instruction for students with disabilities (Darrow, 2010). “UDL is the flexible design of instruction, instructional materials, and evaluation of student learning that can be used with all students, without the need for specialized design or adaptation” (Darrow, 2010, p. 10). Educators can practice UDL by providing an inclusive class climate, encouraging cooperative learning through group interaction, organizing a physical environment that is safe for all students, using flexible and encouraging instructional methods, ensuring that course materials are accessible to all students, regularly providing feedback and assessments in a variety of ways, and planning for specific accommodations where UDL does not meet a student’s needs (Darrow, 2010, p. 10). “If UDL principles are applied appropriately, accommodations for students of varying abilities are imperceptible to the casual observer” (Darrow, 2016, p. 308).

With regard to music education, these principles can be applied to any music curricula, “provided music educators are aware of and understand the principles of UDL, are conscious of the many learner differences represented in their classrooms, and are aware of all the resources available to make a curriculum truly universal” (Darrow, 2016,
In fact, UDL has been examined and shown to be effective with regard to three general music approaches: Dalcroze, Kodály, and Orff:

As increasing numbers of students with disabilities are entering public schools, music educators have found that certain aspects of these European approaches are useful in teaching students with special needs. Students have benefited from the movements used in the Dalcroze approach, from the use of visual aids found in the Kodály approach, and from the kinesthetic function of playing large instruments used in the Orff approach. (Darrow, 2016, p. 318)

All of the UD principles could apply to the design of the handbell in that it is usable by nearly anyone, it will produce sound using a variety of techniques, its clapper system gives it a simple and intuitive design, its use and notation system is easily perceived, it has a high tolerance for error in producing sound, other than a low bass bell it requires low physical effort to ring, and their different sizes make them appropriate for nearly anyone.

Not only does the handbell fulfill the requirements for universal design, but ensemble handbell ringing can be seen as a setting for universal design learning. Ensemble ringing’s structure is inclusive in attitude, encourages cooperative learning through group interaction, functions within a physical environment that is safe for all participants, can provide flexible and encouraging instruction, ensures that learning materials are accessible to all participants by providing each person with a full musical score from which to perform, provides continual feedback and assessment during the music making process, and can provide certain accommodations such as reassigning bells
for participants that may be facing musical challenges.

The benefits and accessibility of handbells has been noted in professional journals such as *Music Educators Journal* (Westcott, 1962; Erb, 1964; Faris, 1978; Bunting, 1980), *American Music Teacher* (Avedikian, 1983), and the *Choral Journal* (Taylor, 1979). It has been the subject of dissertations and theses in disparate areas of extended technique (Guebert, 2014), ethics and standards for the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers, Inc. (Brown, 1994), instructional manuals (Behnke, 1983; Durrick, 1994), and one analysis of a handbell composition (Schildknecht, 2006). The handbell has also been featured in at least two articles in the *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* (Rossing & Sathoff, 1980; Sathoff & Rossing, 1983) with regard to its scientific properties, and handchimes have been studied in music therapy (Rubin, 1976; Skingley, 2010; Scheffel & Matney, 2014). However, handbells have, to my best knowledge, never been studied from a phenomenological or sociological perspective until the present study.
Chapter Four: Qualitative Phenomenological Research

“Phenomenology is concerned with understanding a phenomenon rather than explaining it.” (Sadala & Adorno, 2002, p. 289)

Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand handbell musicians’ perceptions of embodiment or the body-as-instrument phenomenon that occurs during ringing, the collective experience that happens as bodies communicate and function as one instrument, and the unique characteristics of the design of the instrument that affords avenues of accessibility in ways that other musical experiences may not.

In an attempt to examine the embodied, dualistic orientation, and inclusive properties of ensemble handbell ringing, the following questions directly informed this study:

1. What are handbell musicians’ perceptions of embodied handbell ringing and/or embodied learning?
2. What are handbell musicians’ perceptions of functioning as one unified instrument?
3. How are handbells unique with regard to their accessibility?

To best answer these questions, a phenomenological method of qualitative inquiry was implemented.

Phenomenological Methodology

“Phenomenology is the study of the world as it appears to individuals when they lay aside the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit their immediate
experience of the phenomena” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, p. 495). The goal of this method of inquiry is to understand how individuals construct reality, and is therefore similar to other qualitative methods in its focus. In this tradition, knowledge begins when we experience phenomena such as sensations, perceptions, and ideations that become conscious when we focus upon an object (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Phenomenological research, then, attempts to understand people’s perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a particular phenomenon of lived experience, which makes it an ideal methodology for the purposes of this study.

Within phenomenological research, three primary approaches exist: descriptive, interpretive, and hermeneutic phenomenology (Porter & Cohen, 2013). This study implemented a descriptive phenomenological approach as it was my aim to better understand the “essential structure” of the participants’ experience (p. 182). Specifically, I followed Colaizzi’s (1978) methodological prototype for descriptive phenomenological research by documenting my personal assumptions about the phenomena. From this personal standpoint, I constructed direct questions in order to tap into the participants’ experiences (See Appendix C for Interview Schedule). I then chose participants who had experienced the same phenomena in order to collect their responses, or “protocols” (Porter & Cohen, 2013, p. 182). The following steps were used to analyze the responses: (a) I read all protocols, (b) extracted significant statements, (c) formulated meanings, (d) organized meanings into groups of themes, (e) validated themes by referring back to the protocols, (f) wrote a comprehensive description, (g) formulated a statement that captured the structure of the phenomenon, (h) requested validation from each participant regarding
my interpretation, and (i) made changes or additions to the analysis pursuant to the participants’ feedback (Porter & Cohen, 2017).

Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) provide further qualifications which are necessary for the appropriate application of this methodology. First, the topic of inquiry must hold personal and social significance that will engage the researcher both intellectually and emotionally. “It is important for a phenomenological researcher to be invested in the topic in this way because she will be collecting data on her own experience of the phenomenon as well as the experiences of her research participants” (p. 495). I meet this qualification because I have been teaching handbell ringing for 20 years, have written a Master’s thesis that studied the teaching new ringers embodied language versus traditional music vocabulary, and have published a text on handbell artistry that uses embodied language. I am both invested in the topic and have my own experience from which to draw.

The second is that the participants must “have experienced the phenomena being studied and share the researcher’s interest in understanding its nature and meanings” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, p. 496). In this study, the participants were selected based on my relationship with their directors and my recognition of their embodied style. In performance, these ensembles display body-as-instrument technique, whole-body ringing, and a noticeable camaraderie with each other. These participants are listed in Table 2 below.

Another consideration for phenomenological research is that the participants are interviewed with the goal of describing the phenomenon from all aspects of the
experience. Bevan (2014) provides a structure and method for conducting interviews that yields accurate descriptions of experience in a systematic way. Instead of relying on a general qualitative interview method, the phenomenological interview process ensures that even the data are obtained in a phenomenological manner. The phenomenological interview process begins with, and is controlled by, an overarching phenomenological attitude by the researcher that is characterized by critical self-questioning that encourages the ongoing conscious bracketing (or setting aside) of personal knowledge. In this study, I approached each interview with eager anticipation and was grateful for the opportunity to hear and discuss what I suspected would be differing perspectives on an art form whose characteristics can be difficult to capture in words. For nine of the interviews, I traveled long distances to conduct this research. These multi-day trips provided me with the opportunity to intentionally prepare myself mentally for the encounters, and to come away from each trip feeling as if I had experienced something quite powerful through those interactions. So, with this attitudinal compass in place, I approached the interviews with an acceptance of the natural attitude of the participant, engaged in a reflexive critical dialogue with myself, and actively listened to the participants’ responses (Bevan, 2014).

In this study, the participants were from different parts of the country, were different ages and in different seasons of life, and were members of ensembles with different “personalities.” I anticipated and accepted that each participant would bring a specific attitude or personal perspective based on their own handbell experience, and I listened actively as they spoke. I asked follow-up questions when answers provided room for deeper exploration. So in this way, I implemented an interview structure that was
contextual, and attempted to not only apprehend but to clarify the phenomenon. This was
accomplished through what Bevan (2014) describes as a descriptive method that utilizes
broad, open-ended questions to engage the participant in possible imaginative variations
of their original answers. “[This] approach also enables a researcher to demonstrate
consistency, dependability, credibility, and trustworthiness, which is essential for the
quality of research” (Bevan, 2014, p. 143). Considering the purpose and procedure
implemented in this phenomenological study, it seemed a logical partner in my attempt to
better understand handbell musicians’ sensations and perceptions felt during ensemble
ringing.

Participants of the Study

A purposive sampling procedure of participants was used to select handbell
musicians and their directors and to examine the phenomena of embodied performance,
musical communitas, and issues of accessibility. Handbell musicians of various ages
from different kinds of ensembles, including professional and community ensembles
from five different parts of the United States were invited to share their experience of
being a handbell musician. They were chosen due to their engagement in embodied
performance practices and because they participated in handbell ensembles that
demonstrated camaraderie within the ensemble. Handbell musicians were invited to
participate in this study through an invitation letter which explained the purpose of the
study and its parameters. (See Appendix D for Invitation Letter). During the summer of
2014, 14 people were solicited and 11 accepted the invitation to participate. Beginning in
January of 2015, I interviewed nine of the participants in their rehearsal spaces, one at my
home, and one through email.

Pseudonyms were assigned to participants due to the intimacy of the handbell community and the delicacy of reporting within such a known community. See Table 1 below for a list of participants and their demographic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Role(s)</th>
<th>Type of Ensemble</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Director; Ringer</td>
<td>Adult Community Ensemble</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>01/17/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>Ringer; Music Teacher</td>
<td>Adult Community Ensemble</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>01/17/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Ringer; IT Consultant</td>
<td>Adult Community Ensemble</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>01/17/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Ringer; Church Musician, Clinician</td>
<td>Adult Community Ensemble / Solo Ringer</td>
<td>Spring, TX</td>
<td>03/14/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>Ringer; Project Manager</td>
<td>Adult Community Ensemble</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
<td>04/13/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan</td>
<td>Ringer; Elementary Music Teacher</td>
<td>Adult Community Ensemble</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
<td>04/13/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Director; Elementary Music Teacher</td>
<td>Adult Community Ensemble</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
<td>04/13/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Ringer; College Student</td>
<td>Youth Ensemble through Private Music Ed company</td>
<td>Morganville, NJ</td>
<td>05/03/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Ringer; High School Student</td>
<td>Youth Ensemble through Private Music Ed company</td>
<td>Morganville, NJ</td>
<td>05/03/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>Director; choral teacher; Private Music Ed company</td>
<td>Youth Ensemble through Private Music Ed company</td>
<td>Morganville, NJ</td>
<td>05/03/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Ringer; Retired Accountant</td>
<td>Retired from Adult Community Ensemble</td>
<td>Grand Rapids, MI</td>
<td>06/15/15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Participants

Data Collection

The data for this study were gathered through the following means. I conducted 11 semi-structured, open-ended interviews of ensemble members and their directors. I
generated field notes from observing the participants as they engaged in rehearsals, concerts, and other related activities. Descriptive, and reflective field notes were handwritten during observations and were meant to assist in placing each interview within a cultural context, and to document my own personal experience during the interview visit. I also took photos and videos using an iPhone to support the field notes with the permission of the participants. These data were collected between January and June of 2015. (See Appendix C for the Interview Schedule.)

In January of 2015, I traveled to Los Angeles, CA to interview the first three participants who ring in an ensemble that performs without the aid of a conductor. I spent two days visiting informally with the participants, watching a rehearsal, taking photos of their extensive collection of bells, and videotaping their self-directed music making. During the rehearsal, which took place in the sanctuary of a church, I took field notes, photos, and videos. I interviewed the participants at different times throughout the day in a room that appeared to be a secretarial workroom on the opposite end of the building from where they were rehearsing. The ensemble rehearsed for six to eight hours (once per

---

**Figure 16. Sample Field Note**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Subjective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wearing black; red concert attire</td>
<td>greatallet tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all-adult group</td>
<td>their &quot;pp&quot; ringing is exquisite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 men, 10 women</td>
<td>ringers look like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 act. rehearsals</td>
<td>they're really</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everyone is smiling</td>
<td>enjoying themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ringers changed positions</td>
<td>&quot;call&quot; was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>director said they are a family</td>
<td>stunning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bass ringers danced</td>
<td>director is a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>during Teramonti</td>
<td>&quot;story teller&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one piece was memorized</td>
<td>their stopped tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they had to direct</td>
<td>are flawless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ringers lifted bells together</td>
<td>create/contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there were different colored</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lights shining around</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ringers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ringers sang &quot;don't be bad&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glowers while ringing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ringers stepped away from</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tables when done ringing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>then stepped up to tables</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at the beginning of each</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new piece</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i wore a theme from Muppet Show</td>
<td>using kazoos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
month), and one of the members flew from San Francisco to participate. During the rehearsal there was a break for lunch, as well as an afternoon break with chocolate and a cake to celebrate one of the member’s birthdays. This short break took place in the same room as the interviews had earlier that day.

In March of 2015, I interviewed a participant from Spring, TX at my home in Newport, VT, who had come for a personal visit. This participant and I are friends but had never before spoken specifically about the research. The perceptions she shared during the interview represented new information different from any informal conversation we had had in the past. I sought her perceptions of what it feels like to be a handbell musician because I suspected they would be different from my own because she has a degree in theatre and views her handbell experience through the lens of an actress on stage. This was a perspective with which I have no personal experience, and I was fascinated by her answers.

In April of 2015, I traveled to Boston, MA to observe a rehearsal and interview three participants from a community ensemble. The interviews were conducted in the lobby of the church where the ensemble rehearses. This made it more challenging to record the interview electronically, as well as conduct the interview without being interrupted. The space that was used was located in a corner of the lobby where a group of couches were clustered underneath the stairs that led to the rehearsal space. Although it was a relatively private space, the space was not quiet. I do feel that the participants were able to answer my questions in a confidential way, but we were constantly stopping to acknowledge members of the ensemble as they arrived for rehearsal and greeted to us
on their way up the stairs.

In May of 2015, I traveled to Morganville, NJ to observe the rehearsal of a youth ensemble that exists as a part of a privately owned music education enterprise. They operated out of a small building, which consisted of multiple classrooms. Although I fully intended to be an observer and take field notes during the rehearsal, I was offered the opportunity to fill in for a missing ringer, the account of which is provided later in this chapter.

The participant I interviewed through email was a member of a community ensemble from Grand Rapids, MI. In May of 2015, I observed a rehearsal of the ensemble via Skype, and then had difficulty scheduling follow-up Skype interviews with two of its members and their director. I finally settled on interviewing just one of the members through email. This electronic conversation took place in June of 2015 when I sent her the interview questions via email and she responded back through the same.

**Data Management**

All in-person interviews were electronically recorded on my iPhone and then transcribed using Audacity software into a running narrative in Pages (Apple’s version of Word). Many of the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, and the transcription was double-checked by the researcher. Member checks were conducted via email with each participant after transcriptions were completed. Three responded with edits, six responded with no edits, one did not respond, and the one conducted via email did not need to be checked for accuracy.
Data Analysis

As stated above, I followed Colazzi’s (1978) methodological prototype for descriptive phenomenological research. To do this, each narrative transcription was then imported into a table created in Pages. Individual rows separated the interviewer’s questions from the participant’s responses. Column headings were “Transcription,” “Key Objects of Concern,” and “Emergent Themes.” Key objects of concern were words taken verbatim from the transcript that seemed powerful, loaded, or unique. These words were then interpreted through its context within the sentences. Similarly, the interpreted key objects of concern were grouped and interpreted together, which resulted in emergent themes. Each was assigned a different color, and responses that were chosen for direct quotation in the findings were highlighted with the corresponding color. After the analysis was complete and the findings were written, I sent the findings to those participants for which I still had contact information via email to ensure that I had interpreted their responses appropriately. Six of those nine participants responded, and no edits were requested.

Ethical Considerations

About the researcher. At the time when my passion for handbells became obvious to me, I had reentered academia as a graduate student after having taught choral music for 20 years and handbells for 12 years. I knew that I wanted to contribute somehow to scholarly research about the phenomenon of what happens experientially when one engages in ensemble ringing because I felt that the instrument did not receive the status it deserved in the research or practice of music education. Thus, in my
unpublished master’s thesis (2009), I conducted a quantitative study on the effectiveness of Laban Movement Theory language on beginner handbell ringers titled, *The Application of Laban Space/Body/Effort/Shape to Handbell Rehearsal Pedagogy and Its Comparative Effects on Ringing Performance*. Although I was pleased with the outcome, none of the joy, inter-personal communication, or personal growth of the ringers had been captured by the numbers. My desire was to continue researching how including handbells in music education practice could benefit students, but in this study I wanted to discover how the music making process was experienced by participants, because in my own professional and personal experience there seemed to be qualities of experience that were unique to handbell ensemble ringing.

After my first study, I published, *Handbell Artistry From the Inside Out: Laban Movement Theory for the Handbell Musician* (Strepka, 2012), and I began receiving invitations from all over the country to teach the language of movement to handbell musicians. Suddenly, I went from observer to influencer, or what Banks (1998) refers to as an “indigenous-insider.” Banks (1998) provides definitions of four different kinds of researchers. The “external-outsider” belongs to a community different from the one in which he or she is studying, and has only a partial understanding of its values, perspectives, and knowledge. The result is that he or she is prone to misunderstand and misinterpret the behaviors being studied. As is with the external-outsider, the “external-insider” does not belong to the community he or she is studying, but endorses the values and beliefs of the studied community over his or her indigenous community, and thus is seen as an “adopted” insider.
The “indigenous-outsider” is someone who does not align with the values and beliefs of his or her own community, and is therefore viewed by its members as an outsider. Lastly, the “indigenous-insider” is committed to the “unique values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge of his or her indigenous community and culture and is perceived by people within the community as a legitimate community member who can speak with authority about it” (Banks, 1998, p. 8). I presented myself as an indigenous-insider because I felt that the participants would be more likely to trust that their responses would be understood and conveyed with great respect for each of their individual identities as handbell musicians, and that I would understand the uniqueness of the instrument.

To illustrate my approach, the following description of my visit with the youth ensemble from NJ illuminates my own, as well as others’, relationship to the instrument. When I arrived at the rehearsal space, I sat to the side watching the participants getting ready to ring, like an army of ants that characterizes the kind of teamwork that is present in every handbell ensemble. I turned to a clean page of my journal and clicked my pen so that I was prepared to make notes as objective observer when the director said, “I have someone missing tonight. Would you like to ring?” … Would I like to ring? There’s really just one answer to that question, so I put my notebook aside and leapt to the table. Immediately I was one of them—a stranger amongst friends was now an equal contributor in their musical experience. I was even asked my opinion about how I would solve an assignment challenge, and because I had worked with that same piece I was able to make a suggestion. By the end of the evening we had made music together, laughed
together, and collaborated on how to create the best possible performance. I was a stranger who was at home with fellow handbell musicians. Openness to strangers requires vulnerability, a characteristic nurtured through ensemble ringing.

It is not uncommon today that researchers study an aspect or segment of the society in which they themselves are members. The ability to bracket my own perceptions with regard to the phenomena studied was situated in my initial curiosity about something my colleagues and I spoke often about but found difficult to express in words. I began with a completely open mind and was eager to hear others’ perceptions about the unique characteristics of an instrument and musical activity that all of the participants are passionate about.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained how a phenomenological method can provide a structured system for studying a phenomenon about which the researcher and participants are passionate. This passion does not indicate an inability by the researcher and participants to bracket their preconceived ideas about the phenomena, but rather it provides a way of capturing meaningful lived experience. In the next chapter, this experience is conveyed through the words of 11 handbell musicians who were eager to share their perceptions of this unique practice.
Chapter Five: The Musicians and Their Ringing

I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

—Maya Angelou

Renowned poet and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou (1928–2014), testified above to the potency of an embodied experience, and it is this indescribable feeling that all of the participants spoke of when asked the opening question: “How does it feel to be a handbell musician?” It is this feeling that pervades and rises to the top of their stories. They used words like:

![Word Art, “How Ensemble Handbell Ringing Feels”](image)

Best captured in qualitative terms, the data that follow illustrate vivid stories that represent how the participants felt during handbell ringing.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first three sections represent the major themes of embodiment, musical communitas, and accessibility (which contains a
small instance of conflicting data and my interpretations of the same), and a fourth section reports on the themes unrelated to embodiment, communitas, and accessibility that emerged during the analysis.

Table 2 lists the participants’ descriptions of common experiences and their contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Experiential Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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Table 2. Emergent Themes from Data

I have intertwined the participants’ stories and my analysis of them in a reflective, structural narrative that tied the experiences of the participants together by shared theme.
I have also used a bolded font throughout the data reporting to identify three words that at least 73% of the participants used consistently irrespective of the topic being discussed: **together, everyone/everybody, and whole.** This speaks to the unmistakable interdependence of experience, or specifically, how ensemble ringing creates a holistic embodied music making and social experience.

**Embodiment and Whole-Body Expression**

When the participants were asked about their perceptions of embodiment or whole-body music making, their experiences involved the connection between body and communication, body as instrument, and the perceived anthropomorphic qualities that the handbell ensemble embodies. These experiences can be categorized as: communicating a musical idea using the body; the body is the instrument to which the bell responds; a way to express the music inside; an unreplicated, direct physical connection with the instrument; highly physical music making; gestural communication skills; and it’s alive.

**Communicating a musical idea using the body.** Many of the participants in this study expressed the experience of creating a picture within the body of the qualities of the music being played. Music making with handbells invites the entire body to respond to musical impulses and cues, and creates a sense of embodiment. Embodiment can be understood from a “whole-body” perspective, but it can also manifest itself in very specific ways in handbell ringing. Bryan spoke of the coordination of all parts of his body, as well as engaging muscles differently based on what is needed for a musical result:

In terms of the playing of it ... the physicality of it ... it’s this coordination of
motion that needs to be just right to get the music to happen. Otherwise, it’s a total disaster. It’s through the motion of my arms. It’s through the way I stand. I even find it’s my facial expression. It’ll change based on how I’m ringing, or concentrating, or the mood of the music, or the intent of the composer. Um, your whole body has to be engaged, and I find that I engage muscles differently based on the sound that I am trying to create and produce.

Emily enjoys making music with handbells because she gets to dance while she rings:

So um, like for example we played “Lips Are Movin” tonight, and like I ... not like memorize a song, but I know my part really well, and I feel like ... I like dance when I play cause it’s such a good song, when I listened to it on the radio, I’m thinking of my part, and it’s so much fun cuz you just, like play it and you’re like so into it, and like I was pushing for “Taking Me to Church” tonight because like I love the line that I play, cause it’s so involved, and I feel like, um, what’s the first song we played? “Capriccio?” Yeah, that one, um, there was this part where it’s in 6/8 so it has a dotted quarter note, and then another dotted quarter note that’s shaken, and then you go into the melody again, so like you feel the energy in that last shake and then you go into it and it’s like this really cool experience.

The necessity of whole-body engagement with the instrument to create artistry has already been discussed, but what Emily is describing is that engagement with this instrument causes her to experience dance-like sensations as she feels the music in her
body.

For Kelly, embodiment in handbell ringing is a transmutation of self into the music: “I’m a very physically dynamic ringer. I don’t just stand there and ring my two bells. I put my whole body into it. And for me it’s like I’m getting my whole person into the music. It’s not just the notes. It’s now me, it’s my body, it’s my soul, it’s my whole person that is being put into the music with bells.” Kelly experienced embodiment as being “at one” with the music, which is something that others will speak about later in this chapter. Coordination of all parts of the body, engagement of different muscles, dance-like sensations, and the transmutation of self into the music were ways that some of the participants experienced embodiment.

**The body is the instrument to which the bell responds.** Due to handbell directors with backgrounds in Dalcroze, Laban, and other movement-based pedagogies, many handbell musicians have adopted the mantra, “the body is the instrument, not the bell.” I believe that handbell clinician and Dalcroze proponent, Timothy Waugh, is the master teacher that we have to thank for the initial progress regarding the body as the instrument. But why did this characterization come to be? What is it about the bell/body partnership that makes this pedagogical expression so befitting?

Steven summed it up:

Well, although I said that at an amateur level they can find a way of making a sound, and that’s great, but I think in order to truly be musical you have to understand that your body is your instrument. … Um we as humans are so used to moving very utilitarian. We walk to get things, we learn how to pick things up,
but we don’t often experience our bodies in a sort of an expressive movement way. And so part of a handbell rehearsal has to be giving them both kinesthetic and verbal language to understand … that it’s okay to move your body in more expressive ways. Um, in fact, something that I do with my kindergarten through fifth grade is teaching them how to move, first without music, but how to move their bodies in creative ways ... moving in all different directions, and not just walking forward, moving at all different levels, moving at all different weights, so that they can realize the physical possibilities of movement. And then it slowly becomes moving to sound cues, and then moving to music that they’re hearing, and then finally, when they are making music and applying those movement experiences to [instruments] … If they do have those experiences, they understand how their body is connected to those two things in their hands. And really those two things are just an extension of their bodies.

David added that the handbell “forces” him (again, I would interpret it as “draws” him) to use his body musically:

As a band member playing either cello or saxophone, you’re kind of stuck to your chair, and your movements are kind of confined to you sitting in a chair, the space between your instrument and yourself, or the two legs or the people sitting next to you. And I think with handbells, with everyone moving together in a certain direction and having those people forced to work together, I think rather than having one person rocking the boat, you have 12 … I think, that’s how body comes in to it. If you can’t verbally talk to the person next to you because that will
ruin the music, so you’re forced to express yourself through your body then, and I think that’s very important as a bell ringer.

Eleanor provided another surprising moment for me as a researcher when she described what happens when ringers do not use their whole bodies to make music:

It’s not just standing still and a lot of what we would see is the presentation and the encouragement of non-movement, no smiling, no interaction, and being a visual person, that was not appealing to me. So, being able to express the music and use your **whole** body, because the bells are simply an extension of you, I think it actually sounds better, personally. I think it looks more interesting … I think that bells ... I think they should be an extension of you – that you should move with them and not stand still. I don’t think that fulfills their potential.

Eleanor spoke about the instrument in anthropomorphic terms—“their potential.” Can a handbell have potential? She felt that it does, and I believe it does because there exists a felt partnership between the musician and the instrument. Embodiment is necessary to create artistry with the instrument, and the instrument’s design invites embodiment. It is almost a “living” relationship between the musician and the bell.

**A way to express the music inside.** One of the most unique features of the handbell is that it has been described as the instrument that best allows people to express outwardly the music that is happening inwardly. Emily said, “[I]t’s so body-involved, because like you’re using your **whole** body to express what you are feeling in that music.” Emily described using the body as a transmitter of music that resides inside oneself. Eleanor offered a similar statement, “[Handbells allow you] to express the music
and use your whole body, because the bells are an extension of you …” Ann said it this way:

When I found handbells as an instrument, it became that instrument where I was able to take what music was doing inside of me and release it outside of me. I tried different instruments – piano, singing, and um and other things along the way, but nothing released whatever music was stirring inside of me like handbells did, and um something about being “at one” with that instrument … I play the cello now and I feel very ‘at one’ with that instrument as well but it’s not the same as being a handbell musician for me, particularly, because something inside of me – the music inside of me – is released through that instrument. … handbells [are] the instrument that really allow[s] the music to come out of me as a person.

Feeling as if you are “one” with an instrument can be the result of many different factors, and it was difficult for Ann to really put into words. It is interesting to note that there are five points of contact with the cello, and yet she feels more at one with the handbell. In a follow-up discussion with her regarding this point, she clarified that she feels that she joins “together with” her cello to make music (two separate identities), but she feels “one with” handbells. Some of the possible factors in this distinction—the direct physical connection to the sound-making mechanism and the choices she is required to make with her body—are further explored in this study.

An unreplicated, direct physical connection with the instrument. An instrument that responds to the physical movements of your body is not uncommon, but
something very different is experienced when your body must move that instrument through space, just as music moves through time. It is the physical connection to that instrument’s sound-making mechanism that creates a visceral feeling that some say is unreplicated in any other instrument. Ethan shared how he feels when ringing:

The percussive nature of the instrument, I think in some respects it makes you feel very powerful, because of the connection between your muscles and your hand and the clapper striking metal. But the other thing about is when you have the ability, when you have the requirement to be or to do something gentle and soft - the fact that you have to manipulate that same clapper, which is essentially a hammer against metal, in such a way that it needs to be graceful and beautiful, and maybe piano in dynamic, it really makes you think about how directly connected your body is to the sound and how this one instrument can really make more than ding and dong. I think when audiences hear a handbell choir, their reaction might be “I didn’t know bells could do that, that’s really cool.” So, that direct physical connection to the instrument is something that you can’t replicate in many other instruments, or any other instrument for that matter.

Jill said that, for her, music becomes “felt” instead of merely heard: “Playing bells allows me to “feel” the music and express that in my playing—with my facial expressions (which I’m not very good at)—and the ability to move with the beat and interact with those around me.” The direct physical connection with the instrument, although expressed in different terms, was frequently a theme that emerged with regard to handbell ringing. As the participants noted, the physical connection to the music-making
mechanism in the instrument, and the pathways through space that are created when ringing, created a unique and highly fulfilling music making experience.

**Highly physical music making.** Besides remarking about the physical connection to the instrument, the participants commented on the physicality involved in executing notes. Ethan said, “It’s hard to put that into words but when I ring, for example, I’m incredibly physical.” Kelly expressed it in the same way, “I’m a very physically dynamic ringer. I don’t just stand there and ring my two bells. I put my whole body into the music.” Steven shared a similar feeling, “When I first started ringing, I joined the handbell ensemble because it was a different way of making music. At Westminster Choir College everything was about singing, and I loved being in a vocal choir, but the physicality and the cohesiveness of a small ensemble, that happens in handbell group was unlike other ensembles that I have been a part of.” Rather than an expressing an experience based in aestheticism, for these participants, there was a strong corporeal or visceral response to engagement with handbells.

**Gestural communication.** Nugent (2013) states that the “non-verbal transmission and reception of messages, ideas, feelings, signals by using body and hand movements” (n.p.) constitute gestural communication. Although gesture pervades our everyday life, we do not tend to learn this semiotic system in the same way as other linguistics. Norris (2001) suggests its importance, “The body [sic] recognizes and receives communication directly from other bodies, allowing posture, gesture, and imagery to develop as alternative means of transmitting knowledge and feeling of various states of being” (p. 117).
From the point of music making, Hospelhorn and Radinsky (2016) referred to Clayton (2005) in identifying “ideational gestures” in musical performance as a “medium through which musicians’ concept formation might be visible” (p. 1). This visible communication through gesture was seen by the participants as a necessary component in ringing artistically. They felt that handbells provided this avenue for cultivating gestural communication skills:

Because we are embodied and our consciousness is not separable from our embodied state, the physical practices and disciplines in which we engage are fundamental forms of consciousness training. … Body to body, culture is communicated, and the more one identifies with the other person, the more easily there is a transfer of knowledge. (Norris, 2001, pp. 120–121)

For David, the benefits of ringing in an ensemble go beyond the musical growth. He talked with me about the unique communication skills he’s been learning through ensemble ringing: “I think as a bell musician, it’s kind of helped me to communicate better, maybe not so much verbally but um, body-wise to the people around me, and I think that’s something I’ve gotten out of bell ringing.”

Connie said that communication through the body is necessary for musicality in that, “you see what everyone’s expression of [a phrase] is and then you can kind of re-adjust according to what everyone else is doing.” Bryan used the words, “synchronize” and “coordinate” with regard to gestural communication that creates a unified ensemble.

David also shared that ringing has helped him grow as a person: “I think it’s been very um, helpful to me that these people who are my age, and are able to communicate
and help me learn how to ring bells, I came into this group not knowing anything about bells, and now I guess, uh, six months with them, it’s really, um, I’ve grown a lot as a, as not only just musician but as a person, and I think that’s what I’m getting out of this bell group.” A number of responses from this research point to many non-music related benefits of ensemble ringing, with personal growth being one of them.

**It Is Alive!** An outgrowth of embodiment and whole-body expression was the perception that the instrument is a living, breathing organism that takes on the personality of its members. Ann described is this way:

I’ve sung with [a symphony chorus] before, so I’ve been in a very large vocal ensemble before. I’ve been in music ensembles. I haven’t been playing the cello for very long but I have played in small little chamber groups before. I’ve played in piano ensembles with other instruments and that kind of thing. It’s not the same type of – at least for me – living, breathing mechanism that just kind of flows back and forth like you’re creating this brand new instrument out of all of these little bitty instruments that are on the table (smiling and using hands to simulate something small). It’s like it all comes together to recreate this new thing that’s something of itself.

The dependent participation also plays a part in this phenomenon. Ann said:

It feels like you’re part of something that’s beating, that’s alive, um that truly has a life of its own – that you become a part of, whatever you have, you bring to the table and everybody brings their different aspects to the table and it becomes something new in a true handbell ensemble. It becomes something … it creates
something new in every single piece, but not in just the music, in the personality
of the ensemble, because you are relating back and forth, and it doesn’t matter
where you stand, um it doesn’t matter which position that you’re playing because
you get to know the people that you’re playing with, and um even in experiences
that I’ve had where it’s only been a short amount of time where I’ve had
rehearsals with a handbell ensemble, you get to know those people in a certain
way and get to collaborate with them, and you become this thing that is alive, and
breathes on its own, and moves on its own, and um, and that’s what it feels like to
me. It feels like something that is breathing and moving because of all the people
that are together within the ensemble.
Kelly offered a similar statement: “It’s a special connection. Because when you’re really
in the zone it’s as if all of you are breathing together, your hearts are beating together,
and your minds are one. And that’s, that’s really when you know you’re in the zone.”

What they are speaking of here, it seems, is that all of the parts that must exist in a
successful handbell ensemble birth something new and different each time people gather
to play this instrument. The instrument itself takes on the personality of its parts, and it
mimics the real lives of those who bring it to life. In the moments of the creation of a
living instrument, the participants experience a phenomenological event that exists only
in real time. What Svenningsen (2013) used to describe the music making in his own
study, I believe captures this aspect of ensemble ringing—that it’s a “cultural neology, a
new art, born of a new culture—organicity manifest” (p. 119).
Summary

Handbell ringing is seen as a highly physical activity wherein musicians have a direct physical connection with the instrument that is unique. Embodiment or whole-body music making was thought of by the participants as a requisite as well as the result of engagement with the instrument. Handbell ringing was described as an activity that could create an awareness of the body as the instrument, and the ensemble as a living, breathing organism that reflected its members.

Ensemble Ringing as Musical Communitas

When the participants were asked about their perceptions of musical communitas (or collective orientation), they spoke about the simultaneous personal responsibility and collective orientation necessary to make music, that handbells are one instrument played by many, their collective identity was the result of the music making process, music making is non-competitive, members of the ensemble are equally-valued, ringing requires a different kind of connectedness, artistry is dependent upon relational responsibility, and social disconnect impedes musicality.

Simultaneous autonomous and collective identity. The most common theme that emerged from my discussion with the participants was the “individualness” and “teamness” that occurs simultaneously in the music making process in handbell ringing. As much as every musician identified him/herself as a team member, there was also the acknowledgement that ensemble ringing requires heightened individual responsibility. Steven described it this way: “I think to be handbell musician, it’s really understanding teamwork, understanding [your own] responsibility ... learning your music, but that
cohesion that comes and in working on a common musical goal.” Jill said, “As a handbell musician, each part is important, and no one else is playing your part, so you have to be in the right place at the right time.” I remember during the interview how passionately Ethan spoke about the personal responsibility and independence it takes to ring:

[I]’ve heard Jason Wells sum it up really well, is that you’re a couple of keys on a giant bronze piano. Because of that, there is no other instrument like handbells that teach you independence in music making. You’re not one of the flutes, you’re not one of clarinets, you’re not one of the sopranos, you have nobody else to fall back on, and the dependence that the rest of the group has on you in a musical line far exceeds the responsibility that you would have in any other kind of musical ensemble. So there is a ton of responsibility in such an ensemble that requires you to be incredibly musically literate, especially if you want to play [advanced] repertoire … It requires you to be incredibly independent, and requires you to be a really amazing musician and incredibly connected bodily to your instrument.

While Ethan spoke to the personal responsibility, Eleanor pointed to the collective orientation that is also required:

It means to be part of a team. You’re playing where it’s a number of people that come together to make one line, to make it fluid, to make it musical, to breathe together, to work together. To enjoy music together. … think of it like a basketball team or a football team. Everyone is important. Everyone pulls together. And you know a lot of times in bell ringing people will think of just their own little part, but you have to hear the music as a whole to hear the whole
line. That’s why you know sometimes people were too late or too early because they’re not feeling it. It’s just part of being a team player.

Connie described it this way: “Being a handbell musician is a wonderful combination of being an individual musician and yet part of one instrument that’s comprised of many people. And I think that’s what I enjoy so much about it is the uniqueness, but also that feeling of, it’s really just one instrument.”

David spoke about how failure is not an option in ensemble ringing:

I think bells is one of those things where you’re forced to work as a team, as I’ve said before, so I think people have to teach other people how to use and ring bells and you’re not just learning by yourself, you have to learn with other people and again that kind of helps with team unity and communication skills.

David’s use of the word “force” is interesting because it could be interpreted as being at variance with what others have said about what ensemble ringing feels like. Force can connote a negative imposition of one’s will upon another’s. However, force can be defined as a push or pull acting upon an object as a result of its interaction with another object. More specifically, gravitational force is an attractive force between objects causing them to be drawn together. David may have been feeling drawn in (or invited) to learn instead of being pushed. Ethan said is this way, “There is no other instrument like handbells that teach you independence in music making.” When you think of how most other ensembles function, members are not necessarily under any obligation to help others learn their parts. The participants shared, however, that in a handbell ensemble, it is in everyone’s best interest to support each other in the learning process.
What becomes quite apparent in this “team” structure is the heightened level of individual responsibility that is required of all of the members. Each musician has his/her own notes that must be played with rhythmic, dynamic, and stylistic accuracy. If a member fails at that task, the result could be a broken melodic line, fluctuating tempo, inconsistent dynamics, or all of the above. Bryan noted, “[I]n terms of the playing of it … the physicality of it … it’s this coordination of motion that needs to be just right to get the music to happen. Otherwise, it’s a total disaster.” This dichotomy of practice requires that each member contribute to the musical product at his/her highest level of proficiency, and to help others perform at their highest level as well. Connie said, “[T]here’s a real dependency on everybody pulling their own weight, and also a partnership. If someone isn’t able to [play their part], how can I help them?”

Because the interdependence is so palatable, multiple people spoke of the social component to ensemble ringing that is also present within the collective model. They expressed how much more important getting along with the other members is in creating music as compared to other ensembles. Laura said:

I’ve often described it as the ultimate team sport because you all have to be performing at your peaks to get into that group mind—to be able to produce the type of music that can be produced with handbells. Something that’s always stuck with me is “Ring Of Fire” used to do a demonstration during their concerts where they’d get all 12 ringers on a single piano—just playing their individual notes on that piano – and that is really such a magnificent image of what handbells is. You know, the togetherness, the (sigh) again the group mind that you need to be able
to perform. Socially—I don’t think you could have a really successful ensemble if there is animosity between the members. I think you really need to be, if not the best of friends, at least amiable towards everyone in the group. If there’s any kind of disagreement or personality clashes, it’s really hard to get to where you need to get to.

Communitas (or “team” as the participants referred to it) is a ubiquitous concept with regard to ensemble ringing, and exhibits the qualities of a “loss of ego” amongst members, as well as “easy mutual help, and long-term ties with others” (Turner, 2012, p. 3). The communication in ringing must be present but unspoken, which is tied back to the gestural communication that can happen within a body-based experience.

David said:

I actually started out my music career, as a cellist and a saxophone player and I just started this year as a bell musician and coming to this bell group, I think I started becoming more aware of working as a team with the people around me and I think bells give you that certain type of team feeling like you have to understand how you, yourself at working to, as a part of an ensemble, like everyone working together as the ensemble as one unit and, I think the communication especially is one of those things that you have to be aware of in a bell ensemble.

Emily put it this way, “[Y]ou have to be very close, not only musically with those people but close in relationship with those people.” Steven used a word that may not
necessarily be applicable in other mediums, and that was “trust.” He said, “Musically it’s so related to the social piece. It’s being able to trust and rely on the other musicians in the ensemble.” Ensemble ringing, therefore, requires not only exceptional personal skill and a collective mentality, but trust in, and reliance upon, your ensemble members in the music making process, as will be discussed later in this section.

**One instrument played by many.** One of the greatest differences between handbells and most other instruments is that it is considered to be one instrument played by many musicians. While there are examples of communal instruments other than handbells, such as the tonal bass drums used in marching bands and the gamelan, the level of interdependence needed for ensemble handbell ringing sets these experiences apart from that of most other ensembles.

The participants who participated in both handbell and other ensembles explained the felt difference between the two types of music making. David explained: “I guess as a string player or a cellist, you are working as a part of the ensemble, but within a bell group, everyone’s working as that one part to be one ensemble, you have to act as one unit and, I think that’s again part of that communication too that probably stalls many bell groups, and I think that’s where I’ve started to, you know, improve on as I’ve gone on with this bell group.” David feels that an unhealthy paradigm of communication can actually “stall many” groups from being the best they can be, whereas healthy communication fuels forward momentum. In essence, communication is a readily available tool that some do not utilize, and when they do not, the ensemble suffers.

Bryan offered a similar statement:
It’s really a group of people working together on one shared goal. You have to have a unified vision, then you have to coordinate with everybody to make that vision happen ... to realize it. To be a handbell musician ... it means to create music with a group, but it’s different than um creating music with like an orchestral ensemble or a choral ensemble because with those groups ... you know it’s several different instruments or several different voices coming together to bring a piece of musical art to life, um but with the handbell ensemble, it’s a group of people bringing one instrument to life to create the music ... to bring it to life.

With regard to the concept of handbells being one instrument, Emily offered this description:

Being part of an ensemble is, it’s like ... [our director] always describes handbells as a giant piano, and I love playing piano, so I feel like it’s really cool, how you can have the left hand and the right hand played by different people, like two notes played by every single person, and how cohesively they can play together and you can play a section so legato, so marcato, so staccato and you have so many different people on the same page as you, so everyone is on the same page, and I feel that’s a really cool experience …

Many participants spoke about the unique level of interdependence needed for ensemble handbell ringing as opposed to other communal instruments. They expressed their experience with phrases like “one unit,” “one shared goal,” “unified vision,” and in words like “coordination” and “cohesive.” These concepts define the very nature of this
instrument played by many.

**Identity through music making.** The participants in this study spoke specifically about their identity as handbell musicians, and that identity as one member of a communal instrument results from the act of group performance. Although some handbell musicians may identify themselves with regard to the function they perform (bass ringer vs. treble), essentially they do not identify themselves as handbell musicians outside the context of others. I asked Laura, “So after playing bells after 17 years, you still wouldn’t consider yourself a musician?” to which she answered, “(big sigh) I don’t most of the time, just because I don’t understand the theory in any great depth.” I then responded, “So, this is very interesting … if you don’t consider yourself a musician, when you’re in the zone with the ensemble and you’re making incredible music, as you’ve said, how do you see your identity in that place?” The exchange continued, “That’s not fair (laughing),” she said. I dug further, “That’s not a leading question. That’s a real question. If you don’t consider yourself a musician and you’re making really great music, how do you see yourself at that moment?” She clarified, “I did say that most of the time I don’t consider myself a musician. Those cases – yes. The performing aspect of being a musician—I think I can get there. But the analytic and preparation time or preparation phase if we’re playing a piece—I think I’m lacking there. A term I’ve used to describe myself is a musical technician. Rather than … if you put it in the computer world—technician versus engineer—someone who designs and builds the stuff versus someone who works with it.” I thought that was a very interesting response and asked, “And you identify more with the technician side of you?” She quickly agreed, “Most of the time –
This was an answer that I did not expect to hear from someone who played handbells. Apart from the act of making music in real time, this ringer does not self-identify as a musician. For me this points to an art form where incredibly difficult music is produced by people, like Laura, who do not always identify with traditional musical paradigms.

Some of the participants identified as a plural or collective identity rather than as an individual when speaking about the music making process. In my conversation with Eleanor, she kept returning to her identification as one contributor to a musical product, “When you think of yourself as a handbell musician you think of yourself as a multiple. Is that correct?” “That is correct … part of a team and you’re working with someone else.” I asked if that was the beauty of it, and value of it for her, and she said, “For me. It’s that … co-existence. And that’s the reason why I haven’t done that much solo ringing because I like ringing with a group.” This is a woman who made groundbreaking contributions to the field of handbell artistry. She has every justification to identify singularly as a handbell musician, but her words kept returning to the importance of the coexistence that happens in ensemble ringing. For her, and multiple others, it’s in the group identity that the synergistic magic resides.

**Non-competitive music making.** The structure of ensemble ringing requires that each musician play a different but equal role in the music making process. No person is competing against another for the same part. Each person needs the other members to bring wholeness to his/her contribution. The musicians in a handbell ensemble *complete*
each other rather than compete against each other. Ethan, high school choral teacher, handbell director, and music entrepreneur, makes a number of important observations:

I would say that besides the responsibility that you have in the musical line, I think being in a handbell ensemble creates a sense of camaraderie that, again, you don’t have in other groups. You’re certainly not in competition with one another and I think this is incredibly important for organizations, like NAfME to understand. You’re not in competition with the second chair or third chair. For example, when you are one of the flutes in an orchestra, are you always completely working 100% together towards a common goal, which is the music? In a really great ensemble maybe you are, but in your subconscious mind you always want to play better than the person sitting next to you, or you want to sing better than the person standing next to you. Or maybe you’re always comparing yourself to those people around you. Conversely, in a handbell ensemble, because no two parts are the same, that’s not a problem. I would probably liken it closely to maybe a jazz ensemble where the instrumentalists all play different instruments. But even in that situation, you know you play alto sax, he plays tenor sax, you probably play all the saxophones, so you’re always going to still be comparing yourself there. But ringing in a handbell ensemble, I think it allows you to be as vulnerable musically as you can be in a musical ensemble because there is no direct competition in handbells. And I am not sure if every handbell musician feels that way. But I believe that if you can train a choir to operate in such a caring nature, you’ll have a super cohesive ensemble. If you can get the
diva out of the ringer and have them be focused on the fact that the art has
everything to do with the teamwork behind it and the musical line, then you don’t
have infighting or jealousy within your ensemble. So, to sum it up, I think it’s one
of the most pure forms of musical camaraderie you can find in the music world.
The non-competitive nature of the medium fosters equality amongst its members, as will
be discussed in the next section. As Svenningsen (2013) said, “This seems more than a
‘club,’ more than just a social gathering, rather it is people, being vulnerable with and for
one another, expressing their humanity and living their absolute equality above and
beyond any temporal or philosophical boundary” (p. 133).

**Equally valued members.** Along with this sense of non-competitiveness comes a
similar but distinct acknowledgement that no ensemble member is more valuable than
another. There are no first chairs – only equal contributors in the creation of a musical
and social product. Connie expressed it this way:

I’ve been in a lot of choirs. I’ve been in a few orchestras, which certainly have the
ensemble qualities. I think the difference with the handbell ensemble is, if you are
not there, people know it automatically. You are one part, and without that one
part the **whole** is definitely missing. In the choir you’re missed, so it’s not that,
but it’s not a sense of practice can’t go on. And so, there’s a real dependency on
**everybody** pulling their own weight, and also a partnership. If someone isn’t able
to do that, how can I help them? And so it’s not only, you know, working toward
that **whole** but also **everybody**’s got the same value.

“How can I help?” in this case is not just a friendly gesture between musicians,
but a basic component of how a handbell ensemble functions. In this art form it is actually possible to “give away” (or reassign) one or many of your notes to another ensemble member so that the music can be complete. This is a different kind of sharing from the prescribed sharing that routinely takes place, for example, when the B4/C5 ringer plays the Db/C# bell when the note is C# and the D/E5 ringer plays it when the note is a Db. When a ringer says to another “how can I help?” and a bell is reassigned, the ringer giving away the bell is showing vulnerability, and the ringer offering to help is extending compassion. In this sense, all of the notes required to create a musical product become the shared capital of all of its members, as do all of its members become investors within such a collaborative system.

Jill also addressed the issue of all ensemble members being of equal value:

I love to be part of a group of musicians making good music. As a handbell musician, each part is important, and no one else is playing your part, so you have to be in the right place at the right time. I always feel like the group is only as good as its weakest player, and when we all rise to the occasion, it is a great feeling to know that we have nailed a piece.

This type of intimacy of failing together and succeeding together is one that the participants shared.

What the participants expressed regarding the equality of members making ensemble handbell ringing an affirming activity is not a new concept. There now exists a large body of empirical evidence to support what has been known for a long time—people need to feel a sense of belonging. The need to belong is associated with
“differences in cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behavior, health, and well being” (Osterman, 2000, p. 327). Cognitively, belonging positively affects people’s perception of others. Emotionally, people experience happiness, contentment, and calm when they feel connected and valued by others (Osterman, 2000). The feeling of being missed when you’re not present, as Connie expressed, is priceless to the human psyche, and is magnified for the handbell musician because of the maximal interdependence that exists in their experience.

With regard to equally valued members, the participants’ perceptions of this aspect of ensemble handbell ringing centered around non-competitiveness and equal contribution. These qualities resulted in vulnerability and compassion between members as they worked together toward a common goal.

**A different kind of connectedness.** Another quality of handbell ensemble ringing that is readily recognized by those who engage in it is that it requires and produces a special connectedness that cannot be found in any other kind of music making. At a recent handbell conference where I was teaching, one participant noted, “I am a trumpet player as well as a handbell musician, and a wrong note on a handbell feels much more like a betrayal than a wrong note on my trumpet.” This kind of special connectedness requires its members to communicate with each other using their bodies as their bodies synchronize to create one unified instrument. This idea was shared by Laura, who explained:

Well, in an orchestral environment each instrument or grouping of instruments plays lines. You know, a piccolo will have a line to play, and if the piccolo player
doesn’t like the flutist, so what, really. I mean as long as the piccolo player knows when to come in, and how to put the nuance into it that needs to be there, all of their notes will show up and be there nice and smooth. With handbells, because you sometimes will have a dozen people playing notes in a line – the closeness that’s required, the meeting of minds that’s required to be able to do that is, to me, on a completely different level than any kind of orchestral or band environment.

Laura’s comments may reflect the fact that she does not think of herself as a musician other than when she is engaged in performance. She has no personal experience playing in an orchestra, and this sentiment may stem from finding an instrument where she has been accepted.

Jill spoke about her special connection to her handbell ensemble and how the connectedness yields shared reward: “[My handbell ensemble] has been like a family to me ... and when we do it well, we are all uplifted.” Group success and failure is felt at a deep level in the handbell ensemble because each member contributes equally to the success or failure of the performance.

Bryan’s response was much like Laura’s in that he felt it was incomparable with other musical mediums: “With the handbell ensemble, it’s a group of people bringing one instrument to life to create the music ... to bring it to life. Um and in order to do that it’s a huge challenge, because you have to synchronize with everybody ... you know ... in your body, in your mind, and in your spirit. You all have to be operating as a unified group to make one instrument sound cohesive and artistic. It’s very different from chorus and orchestra.” Bryan emphasized the sentiment that many handbells represent, not many
instruments, but one instrument played by many people, and that those people need to be operating socially and musically on a different level than in other kinds of ensembles.

Svenningsen (2013) reflects the prime position that intimate connectedness and good relationship held for the participants:

The music is at once an afterthought and (emphasis mine) the most important element. It is the making of music that brings them together but it is the building of relationships and their expression through the life of the organization and within the lives of its members that so thoroughly inflects the music. (p. 132)

The participants in this study experienced a different kind of connectedness through the synchronization of body, mind, and spirit that created a feeling of unity and family-like belonging.

**Artistry is dependent upon relational responsibility.** Not only did the handbell musicians interviewed recognize a different kind of connectedness inherent in the function of the ensemble, but they recognized that their level of artistry greatly depended upon their level of relational responsibility. Connie said that ringing artistically requires you to conform to the other members’ movements: “… you see what everyone’s expression of that is and then you can kind of re-adjust according to what everyone else is doing.” Artistry requires “feeling” the music together, as expressed by Eleanor: “My groups – we would have social time and it was more than just getting together to just do the music, because if you’re friends you feel things better.”

Kelly said that members rely on each other to be musical, in the same way that medieval vocalists did when they shared a melodic line:
Socially it’s fun to make music with other people. And because of the close connection we have with each other in handbells I really think it’s a closer social connection, than we would have say in an orchestra or something. Because in an orchestra—I also play flute—so in the flute section ... you may play the same notes but you might not in an orchestra – you know, everybody has their own different part. But it’s not the same because you’re not relying on each other to complete a musical line like you are in handbells, because it’s hocket.

Handbell “hocketing” can best be compared to hocket in African music in that Western medieval hocket was merely a device, whereas African hocket is a technique for “achieving overall effects of continuity, for building up interlocking, and sometimes complex structures, out of relatively simple elements” (Nketia, 1962, p. 52). Another similarity to African hocket is that it functions within social situations that form part of its meaning (Nketia, 1962).

Steven spoke about the importance of good communication skills when ringing with an ensemble: “… that social piece is so crucial if you’re working with 13 musicians and you’re working together constantly, you have to be able to work with your stand partners in a respectful way. Um, sometimes you have to be able to give them feedback, sometimes you have to be willing to share and really work as a team …”

Laura shared just how rewarding artistry can be that results from intimate connectedness with and reliance on fellow musicians:

Wow. When the ensemble really gels and we achieve that group consciousness that’s required to play well, it’s a feeling like no other. It’s … when we’ve played
concerts and we’ve really nailed a piece because we’re all just in the same
headspace at the same time it’s really an amazing feeling to get to the end of the
piece and kind of wake up, because you’re almost in an altered state of
consciousness while you’re performing, and the group mind that forms is just an
amazing thing to be part of.

This very sensation can be explained through the concept of communitas, as Turner
(2012) described, “Our reaction to true communitas is gratitude—surprised recognition,
then gratitude” (p. 21). While referring to the work of Csikszentmihalyi (2008), Turner
(2012) also explained, “It is an interior state of the alignment of action with awareness, so
close that the two click together in one, achieving a single overwhelming sensation of joy
with the work” (p. 50). Many of the participants’ reactions to ringing in an ensemble
reflected this almost indefinable yet completely palatable feeling of fulfillment.

David spoke about the vulnerability that belonging to a handbell ensemble brings,
“Again as a instrumentalist, I feel like in a band you are yourself ... but bells really forces
you to open up and express, you know, if I’m having a problem here or on a certain
passage, it’s important to express that to your stand partner and to people around you to
tell, you know, make sure that they can help you more …” Again, David’s use of the
word force becomes even more clear here, in that it seems to be a welcomed drawing into
a space where vulnerability is safe.

Brown (2012) provides us with a framework by which we can understand the
fundamentals of vulnerability. She says that “Vulnerability is not knowing victory or
defeat, it’s understanding the necessity of both; it’s engaging. It’s being all in” (Brown,
People who are willing to engage with vulnerability say things like, “I need help,” “Here’s what I need,” “I played a part in that,” “I accept responsibility for that,” and “I’m here for you.” (Brown, 2012, p. 210) These comments are reminiscent of the kinds of conversations that happened during my observations of handbell rehearsals, and they undergird the intimate relationship that ringing requires.

What is it about vulnerability that disarms us? Why do we sometimes fight against the very thing that can bring us such meaningful human interaction? The reason is that vulnerability is costly. “Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection” (Brown, 2012, p. 2). For her research, Brown (2012), interviewed Gay Gaddis, who said “When you shut down vulnerability, you shut down opportunity” (p. 208). When we are willing to engage in vulnerability, it facilitates skill building with regard to being able to handle and manage uncertainty. This aligns with David’s perception that handbells “forces” members to “open up” and to ask for help, as well as Steven’s earlier comment that handbell ringing requires “trust” and “reliance” upon your fellow musicians. These qualities of vulnerability were felt by the participants in this study, and in a positive, not unwelcomed manner.

Connie mentioned the importance of “blending” with the other musicians in the ensemble, and with handbells this is much more than a sonic challenge:

Well socially I think it’s the um, how dependent you are on each other, um, and not ‘this person’s ringing so it’s my turn to ring,’ but the sense of, you have to
blend with the other people’s volume, and the other people’s movements, and
other people’s height and weight. And so um, I think there is almost a heightened
sensitivity. It is not an instrument for a soloist. I mean, there are solo handbell
players but, when you play in the ensemble, there’s ... it’s really, it’s really about
the group.

Norris (2001) states how when identification with others is intensified, “... and body
knowledge becomes ever more communal, increasing participation and decreasing
insistence on ego result in a growing experience of community” (p. 121). Eleanor shared
the feeling she gets when real artistry, through cohesiveness, is present:

[W]hen you play together as a group with bells, there’s just nothing like it. And if
you can make that certain movement where there’s tension/release, and you have
a crescendo and you’re a part of that it’s just an amazing feeling.

The participants in this study recognized that their level of artistry was dependent upon
the level of relational responsibility in which they were willing to invest. Their success
depended as much upon their relationships with their fellow members as their own
ringing skill.

Social disconnect impedes musicality. Healthy relationships have been shown to
be a requirement of good handbell artistry whether the members engage in it or not. What
happens to the music when, for social or other reasons, members do not engage with each
other with the required level of intentionality? I once observed a performance by an
ensemble that was auditioned and its members were chosen from a number of highly
accomplished ringers. What was evident during the performance was their complete lack
of connectedness to each other. Most of them looked as if they were vying for the Diva of the Year award instead of allowing their great talent to be subsumed into a beautiful artistic whole.

Bryan has experienced it this way:

In terms of the social piece ... you really have to get along with the other people in your group. I’ve seen different ensembles with different social dynamics and when the people are not cohesive socially, it shows in the music. Um, it’s not unified. There’s tension. There’s one group of people trying to pull the piece one way, and another group, the other, or there’s tension between the director and the performers. To have the highest possible musical product you need to agree with all these other people, and get along with them. You also work in very close quarters. It’s not like you have your chair and music stand and this little bubble around you. Uh you’re right next to each other bumping elbows with people ...., or at least we do a lot in here. You have to be able to work with these people, and you also have to share what you have in front of you. You might not be able to execute your part entirely yourself, and so you need to have people next to you to help you. You need to carefully plan that and coordinate that. And if you have social issues with those people, it’s a lot harder to get those instrumental, musical issues worked out.

Ann had a similar story to share:

I guess that’s what makes it different socially is that you end up having to ... for the ensemble to really truly work and to create something that’s musical you
really have to become social. You have to become a group that knows each other and knows something about each other, and has an investment in the other people that are around you, an investment in who they are, and the kind of ringers they are, the kind of musicians they are, the kind of people that they are, everything about them, what they bring to the table every single day when they’re walking up to the table as a musician. In the “hi, how are you, how was your day?” is just as important as “can you get this bell for me in measure 46?” I think it’s just as important because you have to have that level of knowing where each other is at as you’re walking up to the table. If not, there can be a sense of a wall (stressed vocally)—the proverbial vertical boxes all along the table that none of us really wants in a handbell ensemble, and if we’re separated socially, it can separate us musically.

It seems that what these participants were expressing was the conundrum created when a musical medium requires relational responsibility to succeed. They made clear the joys of participation—the feeling of communitas—when relationships are healthy, but they were also cognizant of just how uncomfortable ensemble handbell ringing can feel when the relationships suffer.

Kelly shared how disconnectedness deeply affects her in performance:

Oh … When you’re not there… when you don’t feel that connection with everybody else it feels very uncomfortable. But just almost like panic because you’re lost. It’s like … then it just becomes notes, just individual notes here and there instead of a cohesive musical whole.
For Kelly, panic is a palatable result of disconnect with her fellow musicians. What Kelly and the other participants seemed to be expressing here is that in ensemble handbell ringing the feeling of complete disconnect from your fellow musicians paralyzes your own ability to perform well. They acknowledged that while there is a heightened sense of success through group-mind, there can also be a heightened sense of defeat when the group is relationally fractured.

**Summary**

Ensemble handbell ringing is an unparalleled collaboration by a group of people who are expected to function at their highest individual level while having a collective attitude. They experience handbells as a communal instrument—one instrument played by many. Identity as a musician is gained through collaboration and in the act of music making, as well as the byproduct of this type of musical system—feeling valued. Performing at one’s peak is fostered, and virtuosic collaboration becomes the most valued skill. The non-competitive atmosphere creates a 100% investment in the music making process and allows for the highest degree of musical vulnerability. All contributors have equal value, which fosters vulnerability and compassion. A deeper level of connectedness is required to be successful in this medium, artistry is dependent upon healthy relationships between members, and social disconnect ultimately impedes artistry.

**Accessibility**

At a recent handbell concert where I was one of the conductors, the audience’s responses of “ooing and ahhing” was audible during and after one of the pieces that had
been exquisitely interpreted by the clinician sharing the podium with me. At the conclusion of that piece, I made a remark to the audience that went something like this: “Imagine this: You are sitting and listening to a symphony orchestra that is playing in the most artistic fashion and you are overwhelmed by the sound. At the conclusion of the concert you approach one of the musicians and say, ‘That was the most beautiful sound I have ever heard, and I would like to join you next time.’ Everyone laughed at the thought, and then I continued, “But, if you were to approach any of these musicians at the end of this concert and said you would like to join them, their response would be, ‘when would you like to start?’.” For the most part, handbell musicians want to share their craft instead of keep it for themselves. There is a common mission to increase exposure and recruit people who would also become handbell enthusiasts. This is the kind of inclusive attitude we experience in the handbell community because of our instrument’s accessibility.

**Accessible to all on some level.** Inclusiveness is a foundational principle, not only in music education, but in life. But inclusiveness is made impotent without accessibility because accessibility provides for the “all” in inclusiveness. When asked about accessibility, the participants described an instrument that is functionally inclusive for nearly anyone. Kelly described just how accessible handbells are to those with a desire to try:

Anybody can pick up a bell and make a sound. It’s going to be in tune if the bell is in tune, I mean, barring mechanical problems with the actual instrument. So, you don’t have to be able to sing. You don’t even have to be able to hear, really,
you know musical intervals or any of that stuff to be able to play them. You don’t have to know, you don’t have to know a lot of theory to be able to do it. It’s not like organ or piano or continuo, or whatever. Um...In fact, you don’t really don’t need to know anything about music at all to play bells to get started. Because whether you start with one bell or two bells, and even if you’re looking at actual music, there’s only those one or two notes that you have to actually follow. So you teach somebody how to read the rhythms or you write it in on the music, and they’re good to go. If they can tell the right hand from the left hand and can keep a steady beat, they’re good to go. No matter if they have absolutely no musical experience at all.

Jill offered a similar statement as to its simplicity at the beginner level:

[Y]ou can start out being responsible for only two notes—not like the piano or a band or orchestra instrument. There aren’t fancy fingerings to master, or multiple staff notes to memorize. As we can see in the current handbell world, there are many different genres of music being performed by different ages. Handchimes are especially accessible to younger children, and/or those with learning challenges.

As children learn to ring whole notes and their classmates are all striking together at the same time on beat one, they quickly gain confidence. However, when the music becomes less vertical and more horizontal they become increasingly aware of their responsibility to ring independent of those to the left or right of them, as well as their growing dependence on their fellow classmates to complete the musical idea.
Eleanor shared that the instrument’s accessibility allows for those who would not be able to play other instruments, as well as creates a rewarding opportunity for intergenerational music making:

[T]here’s a lot of different levels. I mean on a very basic level it would be someone who maybe would not have the ability to say play the oboe or play the saxophone. They could take two bells and still create music. I know a lot of groups that start with like they circle the notes in different colors, and they write in the counting, or left and right. And so you’re giving them a tool to start learning music. Obviously they can get much further, and can get away from the whole circling thing right away, but it does open it up for – I know that there are a lot of special ed kids that play handchimes sometimes. Youngsters, older people, you know, and it’s something where the groups that I’ve had have been multi-generational—anywhere from 10, 11, 12 year olds and somebody who’s 70. So you can have that kind of an intergenerational bond thing. We had people who were like father/son in the group and mother/daughter in the group. And it was just really rewarding to see them be able to create something together and have a venue to be together. So that was really, really rewarding.

Ethan offered a similar statement:

As far as accessibility is concerned, obviously all age groups can play. You can play bells sitting down, you can play them standing up, you can play them with one arm, you know, you don’t need legs (laughs)...you know what I mean, anybody that wants to play can play, as long as they have at least one arm and an
opposable thumb.

Each of these four participants recognized the inclusive design, not only of the instrument itself, but of the system by which one learns to read music and to ring. They recognized the value of handbells as an introduction to music making for anyone wanting to try, and the opportunity for people of all ages to have an ensemble experience.

On a related note, I have seen and taught adaptive ringing with people who don’t have complete mobility of fingers wherein they malleted bells instead of picking them up. I have also seen a young girl with deformed hands given the responsibility of malleting low bass chimes in advanced-level music. The one who may be considered incapable in other musical mediums was charged with providing the foundational notes for the music.

Inherent advocacy. One of the most memorable and surprising comments made during my research was with regard to accessibility. I think it was surprising because one of the instrument’s biggest selling points for me is it accessibility and inclusiveness, but I had never thought of it as a medium that fosters learning in its participants. David mentioned this unique aspect of the instrument’s accessibility:

I think that’s what makes bells accessible because, it’s not just by yourself. You’re not picking it up and trying to learn it. Um, people are forcing you to learn it, otherwise you’re bringing the rest of the ensemble down. So I think that with someone there to guide you, or actually a lot of people to guide you, I think, it’s really helpful, and I think that’s what kind of opens up the bell world to other people.

As I stated earlier, Connie also mentioned how the design of the handbell
ensemble fosters a relationship between members to help each other succeed. She said, “If someone isn’t able to [play] that, how can I help them? … [I]f we all don’t come along[side] then we can’t cover up.” What David and Connie experienced here is that the design of the ensemble, with each member being solely responsible for a certain number of notes, as well as the sonic reliability of the instrument, both work to create a music making experience that is inherently nurturing. In other words, to have musical success with this instrument, all members must be willing to take responsibility for others’ learning.

**A musical voice for the voiceless.** A unique aspect of its accessibility seems to be that it can fulfill the needs of those who do not identify with having a musical voice. There are many whom, for a variety of reasons, do not like to sing, as well as those who cannot afford to purchase or rent an instrument. Ensemble ringing can meet the needs of those who would otherwise not have a way to express their musical voice. Steven explained just how personal sharing his musical voice is and noted how many never experience the beauty that can come from such personal vulnerability:

I think that as with any instrument it takes a lot of dedication, and a lot of hard work and effort to reach a higher level with the instrument, but I think for an amateur instrument, it’s, especially for a beginning amateur instrument, it is very accessible and it is also less personal than someone singing. Your singing voice is you, and that can be scary for a lot of … especially for a lot of adults, who maybe when they were younger had a terrible music teacher who said “you just lip synch.” We’ve all heard those stories and it’s sad, but [ringing allows them to]
mentally separate themselves from themselves with the tone that is coming out of this [mouth], which is important at the beginning.

Steven recognized an important aspect of the instrument’s accessibility in that it provides a music making opportunity that is less personal than singing. Although we may think of singing as accessible to all because choral music is considered pretty ubiquitous, Bryan also pointed out just how inaccessible singing can be compared to ringing:

They are accessible in terms of having a wide variety of um, personality styles come together to create music, they’re accessible, especially to people who tend to be quieter, or more introverted because you are not using your voice. You’re not using your airflow, um to create the music. You’re using this external instrument ... much in the way that uh, like a trumpet can be a great voice for somebody who’s really quiet musically, handbells, I think, operate the same way. Whereas, you know, I think choral music is not accessible to everyone because some people are so quiet and are introverted. They’re not gonna put their voice out there, to share. So I think in terms of that piece, it works very well with people both quiet and introverted personalities.

Bryan also shed light on how empowering ringing can be to those who are less comfortable with exerting themselves in other situations. Ringing allows them to feel connection, strength, and value, which may be, because of their personalities, qualities they do not experience very often. As also seen in Laura’s earlier response with regard to identity, handbells can offer a musical identity and voice to those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to create music with a group of people, or who simply
might not otherwise feel empowered to do so.

**Always perfectly pitched.** Imagine a middle school music teacher walking into his classroom with his lesson plan in hand, prepared to work with his students on the concept of phrasing—the function of arsic and thetic notes—without any worry of intonation problems. Does that sound impossible? Impossible in a middle school chorus? Impossible in a middle school band? Yes, but this is reality for a middle school handbell ensemble. Kelly said, “**Anybody** can pick up a bell and make a sound. It’s going to be in tune if the bell is in tune, I mean, barring mechanical problems with the actual instrument.” Ethan described his personal experience with this aspect of handbells’ accessibility:

Well, first of all, everything’s always in tune, so it feels great. You know, being a choral director and also being a handbell director, I’ve found that there are some hurdles that you don’t have to jump over being a bell director but that you do have to jump over being a choral director, and it really comes from the music-reading department. The fact that I just have to focus on rhythm initially in order for the students to achieve is very, very encouraging, and the fact that I can get a really awesome result on day one and that the kids can be really excited on day one is the most important. Probably the biggest highlight is that the youngest kids I work with, or have worked with are seventh graders at the middle school program where I taught for nine years. I can bring them in on the first day and we could play a major scale from three octaves, from C to C back down again with pretty darn good technique on day one. They all walk away from that feeling really
accomplished, and I walk away feeling really accomplished as well. So the highlight is that sense of almost immediate gratification. In a vocal ensemble, I spend most of my time deconstructing bad habits—bad breathing, bad intonation, and all sorts of bad posture. Literally, being a vocal choir director, you spend most of your time taking away things that people have sort of layered on their bodies for the last however many years they’ve been alive; all those preconceived notions about singing, what singing should sound like. I spend most of my time telling them “no, that’s not how it is” and “let’s do it this way.” But in handbells, it’s very fresh. It’s a new experience. It’s instant gratification, and it sounds really good from the beginning, so that’s what it feels like being a director. It feels like I have the ability to give something to my students that they can achieve and feel really great about and I can do it very, very quickly.

These directors noted that with ensemble ringing musicians are more able to create musical sound that has integrity, are, in a very short amount of time more able to participate in a successful music making experience with others, and the instructors are more able to teach music concepts without the added struggle of intonation challenges or pre-existing bad habits.

**Rhythmic skill and experience with the entire musical fabric.** As was mentioned above, barring a mechanical problem with the instrument, the handbell remains in tune. By removing the issue of intonation from the learning process, directors and musicians are more able to concentrate on developing musicianship and rhythm. Emily shared earlier about feeling a great sense of accomplishment, especially with
regard to sight reading. She also shared this about rhythmic mastery:

Musically, it’s like ... it just, it opens your eyes to a different, to a lot of different notes, like when, like in band class at school I know how to count in 7/8, I know how to count 8/8 and all these like different rhythms or time signatures, because you learn in a bell choir, there is such a variety of music, you can play anything in bell choir.

Rhythm learning constitutes one of the main focuses of handbell ringing, and Emily stated that her involvement in handbells strengthened her ability to read difficult rhythms in band.

Handbell ringing was perceived to have strengthened rhythm discernment by the participants, and also provided a practice wherein reading notation, and ultimately making music, could happen through a holistic approach. Laura had what could be referred to as a milestone in her learning process when handbells allowed her to connect what her eyes were seeing with the whole musical form. Being able to experience the music from many different perspectives helped to strengthen her notation reading:

For me personally there were a number of at least two real step changes. The biggest one was when I was able to take what I was hearing and equate it to what was on the page. So, again my lack of musical background—when I started, it was … yeah the notes are pretty, great, fine, but how do they relate to what’s on the page? But when I got to the point where … Oh! that line is there. And I’m hearing that. And Oh! My notes come here, and I was able to create that holistic image of the music and equate it to what was on the page, that was a huge change
in my ability to play the instrument well—to make that equivalence. Because until you can do that, you’re just counting.

I asked, “How do you think that happened for you where what you were doing then made sense on the page instead of the other way around?” She answered: “How did it happen…. (sigh) I think it was (long pause) …” I added, “Because you learned how to read music through handbells, yes?” and she said, “Yes. Yeah. Part of it was moving around the table to different assignments instead of just being stuck [at one position] all the time—having to move to different locations and playing different assignments around the table.”

What Laura described is a phenomenon unique to handbell ringing. There is no other instrument whereby musicians are able to experience all parts of the musical fabric—to hear and feel for themselves what it is like to play bass in one piece and middle or treble in another. Tuba players do not get to experience the piccolo player’s part and the small space it is performed within, and sopranos do not get to feel what it is like to sing bass, but handbell musicians get to hear and feel (by virtue of the different weights of the bells) different parts of the musical fabric. Everyone who gets to play bass bells in a piece learns what dominant to tonic movement sounds and feels like. Handbell musicians have the tools to learn first-hand every aspect of musical form.

Ethan summarized the potency of the benefits of handbell ensemble ringing in relation to the sight-reading of music notation:

I think once the music education world recognizes how valuable bells can be as a teaching tool, and how fun it can be for the director, a change might come.
There’s a Facebook group called “I’m a Choir Director.” It’s got about 10,000 members. There are always choir directors posting on there about the frustrations they’re having in their public school environment, and I often think “Wow, what if they had a bell choir?” All of their woes about sight reading will be gone, the respect issue they might be having in their chamber ensemble might be gone. There are just general musicianship issues, music interpretation issues, I guess even social issues that could potentially be solved in a bell choir setting. They would feel more accomplished as directors as well, being able to piggyback off of that instant gratification that a handbell ensemble gives you.

Ethan’s argument for handbells in music education is multifaceted, and the instrument’s strengths as a model for ensemble participation is further explored in the Implications section of this study.

While it was not explicitly mentioned by the participants, it is also important to highlight here that handbell musicians have the opportunity to experience how different sections of the music function, and they have the benefit of making music with the entire score in front of them. Instead of having just the trumpet part to read and relying on the conductor to put that part into context, the handbell musician has the entire score for context, which can heighten musical understanding and empower the musicians. Each musician has the opportunity, and is equipped with the tools, to have a reciprocal and holistic relationship with the music.

**Possible limitations: Another look at accessibility.** It is interesting to note that there were no conflicting data except in the category of accessibility. A few of the
participants did share opposing viewpoints with regard to accessibility as it related to public awareness, public access, religious connotation, and their perception that it was a “necessity” to have a strong musical background.

*Expensive, group-dependent, and associated with religion.* Connie shared what she noted were limits to accessibility:

Well, actually I think handbells are less accessible to people, unfortunately. I think um, first of all they are very tied in to the white, protestant church aura, um and so I think there’s a **whole** multitude of people who never even experience them because of that. Um, they are an expensive instrument, so it’s not like you can decide one day, “I’m gonna start” you really have to find um, you know an ensemble to play with and learn. And I think they are getting more accessible, but um I think of all the instruments you might decide to take up there’s probably more barriers to getting into it because you have to find doubles you can use, or chimes you can use, or someone who can teach you, or someone with familiarity.

I asked, “So you would disagree that they’re accessible?

(Sigh) I’m not saying that people can’t access them, but I do think that there are fewer opportunities, particularly because so many of them are attached to churches, so if you don’t believe in that church’s pedagogy then you’re not going to go and just experience the handbells. There is just too much attached to it.

Because ensemble handbell ringing is a group-dependent experience that requires participants belong to a group, Connie felt that this made the instrument inaccessible to some. She felt that the expense of the instrument hindered its widespread expansion,
which ultimately inhibits accessibility. Connie’s experience has also been that handbells are closely associated with religion, which may limit participation to those who agree with the doctrine of the church that sponsors the handbell ensemble.

**Generally unknown to greater public.** Emily’s concern with regard to accessibility centered around the instrument’s availability to a wide range of audiences rather than to its availability to participants:

I mean, like my parents, and like **everyone** else’s parents, show up to all of our concerts and stuff, so it’s like you know reaching out to the community even if you put up signs, like I know in my high school, like, um, like when we have a band performance, just like our parents show up. So I feel like there should be a better way to reach out to the community about handbells, cuz I say “oh I’m in a bell choir,” I guess they just don’t hear the bell part, and they’re like, “oh you sing?” cuz they don’t know what a bell choir is, and I feel like if people knew what bell choirs were, they’d be so interested in that, cuz people who have viewed like our YouTube videos, “Oh my God that’s so cool,” and I’m like people are so excited to hear like pop music on bells. Cuz I know um, I think it was two years ago, the Piano Guys on YouTube, they were like such a hit cuz they played all this modern music on piano and cello, and I was like, “that’s so cool.” So, if people saw that on handbells, they’d be just as impressed. And I feel like it’s a loss in the community that they don’t look at bell choir that way.

While Emily seemed much more concerned about promoting handbells to a wide range of listeners than how accessibility affects recruitment of new participants, her comments
point to the fact that handbell ringing is not as prominent as other genres, which relates to the issue of access.

*Playing well requires a strong music background.* It was noted above that the design and function of the bell makes handbell ringing easily accessible to players at a basic or beginner level; however, it may also make it inaccessible to many at virtuosic level. Bryan said:

> It’s accessible to a lot of people if you’re playing basic music or you’re playing more advanced music very poorly. But if you’re gonna play something at a very high level you need to have a very strong musical training, I think, to do it well. So, I don’t think it’s that accessible. … [To do] it well … you need a very strong rhythmic background, and also because you’re only playing like one little part of this instrument. To do it well you need to have knowledge of the melody, and the countermelody, and harmonic structure and form, and how your little piece fits into that.

Bryan echoed the sentiments of handbell educators that there currently exists a great deal of mediocre handbell ringing. This is not necessarily because people are incapable of excellence, but because there exists a large percentage of volunteer directors, and a general lack of handbell artistry education (K. McChesney, personal communication, August 20, 2017). Less people have experienced the instrument as played by highly skilled musicians, but because of those virtuosic ensembles, handbells have made some headway in earning the respect of the classical music community (K. McChesney, personal communication, August 21, 2017). The mission to see the
remaining masses of ringers grow in their skill continues to advance through educators who are passionate about the instrument. The accessibility of the instrument can, and does sometimes, result in mediocre artistry. However, the mastery of an instrument, in any medium, takes a lifetime, and handbells can provide most with that opportunity.

Although I do not assume that these responses constitute a competitive attitude within the ensemble, it is necessary to note that two of the participants who spoke of handbells’ inaccessibility were members of the same ensemble. They may, instead, view their membership in a highly skilled ensemble as a unique opportunity that is not necessarily open to everyone.

**Findings Unrelated to Embodiment, Musical Communitas, or Accessibility**

**Sonic Flexibility.** As stated in Chapter Two, handbell artistry has undergone a fundamental philosophical evolution in recent years. It was not until 2010 that handbell ringers were “rebranded” as handbell musicians when the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers began doing business as Handbell Musicians of America. Under this label, it is clearer to see the musician as the creative purveyor of sound, with the bell as the extension of the musical body. From this view, the instrument’s potential for flexibility lies squarely with the musician’s potential for flexibility. It has been said that the handbell is an inflexible instrument much like many other percussion instruments. Marimba, for example, is played by striking downward onto it; the piano is played by sitting at it and pressing keys downward. Crash cymbals are sounded by hitting them together using a prescribed motion. It could be said that the best marimba players use the entire body, but the mallet motion is still limited to the vertical plane. The piano
functions in much the same way using the vertical plane, but yet further limits the
musician’s ability to fully embody the music because he or she is seated. The size of
crash cymbals limits the amount of space they can travel through when played. However,
with the exception of low bass bells, a handbell has the potential to be played more
flexibly than other percussion instruments. Unlike the instruments mentioned above, the
hand holds within it both the striking mechanism (clapper system) and the sounding body
(casting). As an extension of the musician, the handbell is capable of moving
dynamically through space in an outward response to the musician’s inward musical
expression.

Handbells, in the hands of those with an awareness of embodied musicianship,
can produce music that is highly flexible and unique in its sound. Connie said:

I just think that the sound is so different. There are so many different things that
you can do with a handbell. I think it’s something that most people have never
heard, so there is that surprise element to it ... that almost childlike delight when
people hear it for the first time. Um, and I, hmm, it’s limited too. I mean you can’t
make an orchestral sound with it, but um, but it has its own unique characteristics.
So, um you can pull those out and the more trained, and practiced, and rehearsed
you get, the more musically you can get with the instrument.

Laura expressed an even stronger sentiment regarding its flexibility than did
Connie:

What makes it unique musically is the range of different sounds that can be gotten
out of the instrument … anywhere from a legato line to a very staccato series of
notes—different articulations of handbells—that allow you to produce such a variety of musical nuance and sound. It’s ... to me it’s much more flexible than so many other instruments that I’ve listened to.

While Connie felt that handbells can create different sounds, she said that it is the uniqueness of sound that distinguishes it from other instruments. Conversely, Laura expressed that she felt that handbells have a wide range of sound. The difference in these two perceptions may lie in the kind of exposure or personal experience each has had with flexibility in handbell ringing. Laura, for example, may have been surrounded by handbell musicians who had strong dance backgrounds that heightened flexibility of the body, and therefore, of the bell.

Jill agrees that handbells are flexible from a sonic standpoint, but she shared other ways that handbells exhibit their uniqueness through flexibility:

I think the fact that we can be pretty mobile with bells, and that there are many qualities of sound that can be achieved, make the handbell unique from a music standpoint. We can interact with the audience in a way that orchestras and bands cannot, and singers have their mouths occupied. We can play many styles of music, and it is definitely an instrument that can be played by multiple ages in the same group.

While intergenerational music making is not unique to handbells, it is often considered unique, novel, and even inspiring to see young and old musicians in the same band or orchestra. Yet, it is quite commonplace in the world of handbells, particularly in church ensembles.
Challenging musical process. It may be difficult to imagine that an instrument considered highly accessible could also be seen as physically and mentally challenging. To illustrate this, I include Kelly’s quote where she shared the amazing feeling she got when she made the instrument “speak”:

It’s the challenge of picking them up and ringing them, the musical uh challenges, as well. To be able to make these instruments speak and make them convey the musical message, whether that’s the emotion, or whatever, and it’s just amazingly amazing.

She also shared the challenge of ringing them on time and with control:

It’s one of the very few instruments that you actually have to pick the whole instrument up and move it through space to make it sound. Um there are other percussion instruments like that, like a shaker for example, but the challenge to it is that you can’t just “phone it in,” (laugh) you actually have to pick up the things and ring them. Um so musically the control, because getting to them on time—it’s not enough to just ring the bell on time, you have to ring it on time with control.

Similarly, Steven talked about the challenge of being part of one instrument played by many, as well as the challenge the physicality presents:

[You need to understand] that when a melodic line is coming toward you that you are able to receive the line that’s coming to you and continue and hand that line off to the next musician no matter which direction it’s going ... um, and know how those two little bells are a part of that greater instrument. Um, I think musically its also a challenge for people because it’s so physical, that I think
people … I think all instruments are physical but if you’re playing a flute or if you’re playing a clarinet, it can ... you can make a sound just by moving your fingers and not kind of engaging any larger muscles and just simply moving those fingers, and you can get a beautiful tone that way, and you can play the entire melody that way. But with the bells, in order to really have some expression, and have some musicality to it, the only way you can get that bell to ring stronger is to put more force behind it, or to be conscious of lightening up on the force, or ... so I think that physicality is very different from many other instruments, especially at an amateur level.

For Ethan, the challenge was that handbell ringing is a very thoughtful process that connects brain with body:

It’s not as easy as just ringing when your note appears. I guess I’m happy with that in seventh grade, you know if you can ring when your note comes up and you’re on time. Hallelujah, right? But for a real virtuosic handbell ensemble experience, each ringer has to quickly interpret what’s on the page and make sure that the entire path from the page to your eyeballs through your brain to your muscles and eventually to the bell is very thoughtful. That happens so that the right sound comes out of the bell because obviously we know that bells don’t make just one sound. They make one pitch per bell, but they don’t make one sound. And then add that to a musical line … When you think about that you’ll see that it’s really incredibly complex and we’re expecting our ensembles to do it in split seconds—fractions of seconds—to make that choice. I think it’s the fact
that you’re making a choice about what you do with your body that is most important. … I think it has to do with the connection between your eyes to the music and your eyes to your brain. You see that the music is telling you to “speak” in a certain manner, and then your brain has to tell you that a certain set of muscles must fire this way or that so that a particular sound comes out of the bell.

Ethan made clear how with this instrument the musical results can be as varied as the movements available to the ringer, so artistry requires quick interpretation between notation and body. During music making, the participants experienced the challenge of playing on time and with control. This kind of control involves making split second, complex decisions with regard to bodily movements that result in the expression of a musical message.

**Indescribable personal accomplishment.** Considering the heightened connection to the instrument and all of the variables associated with handbell ringing, it is not surprising that the handbell musicians also reported experiencing a heightened level of accomplishment and fulfillment. Kelly said, “I often say handbells is an instant to learn—a lifetime to master… because if you get past that initial step there’s so much richness, so much potential for music making that it’s just really exhilarating.” Laura expressed how great challenge and great reward went hand-in-hand:

It feels … (long sigh) … alternatingly frustrating and fulfilling. What it means to me personally is … to tackle something that I’ve not done for my whole life. So many handbell musicians are lifelong musicians, and they take to it much more
quickly and easily than I do. My only musical instrument is handbells, and I didn’t start learning that until I met my other half. So it’s, to me, a successful concert, doing well in rehearsal is fulfilling in a way that very little else is.

Eleanor said that because the melodic line is shared between many people, ringing with musicality was technically challenging and equally rewarding:

[It’s unique] musically because you play a flute and you’ve got a line. You don’t just have two notes. You play the piano and you’re playing chords (makes motion on table like playing the piano) and you’re playing 10 notes, but in bells you only have two notes in an eight-note passage, and you have to be able to (a) count it, but (b) feel it so that it sounds (speaks musical example once correct vs. not correct) so that it is a line, and I think that that is technically challenging, but really rewarding. I love that part of it.

Emily felt that handbell ringing had given her an advantage with regard to rhythmic sight reading, as well as made her a better musician in general. She attributed her accomplishment to the multi-tasking required in handbell ringing, and how that felt to her:

I think it’s a really, um, accomplishment in my life actually, because in seventh grade we had to audition to be in the bell choir, and then I was asked to be in this group in eighth grade, so like no eighth graders were asked to be in the group at that time, so I’ve been in this choir since the beginning. So, um I feel like it’s an accomplishment cause like most people can’t site read that fast, and like in handbells you learn to site read and you learn about um a lot of different like
syncopated rhythms, there’s a lot going on at once, so I feel like it makes me a better musician as well.

For these participants, sonic flexibility, challenging musical process, and indescribable personal accomplishment were experienced as unique and important aspects of handbell ringing. Although these aspects were deemed unrelated to embodiment, communitas, and accessibility with regard to my analysis, they may be found, in other research models, to be related through the interdependent nature of ensemble handbell ringing.

**Summary**

Ensemble ringing is an art form that is accessible to nearly everyone on some level. Its inherent advocacy encourages the success of each member through its collaborative and compassionate practice. Because it is an inclusive instrument, those who might not otherwise have a musical voice are provided with an opportunity for group performance. Because the instrument is always perfectly pitched, it removes the challenge of intonation and creates an environment for learning even the most challenging rhythms. Handbell musicians have the opportunity to experience all parts
of the musical fabric (bass, accompaniment, and melody), as well as to perform from an
informed perspective by reading from the complete score.

**Treasury of Stories**

In this chapter I have presented the responses of 11 handbell musicians who
answered various questions with regard to ensemble ringing. In the three categories I
explored, embodiment and whole-body expression, ringing as musical communitas, and
accessibility, emergent themes were presented. As was explained above, the only
conflicting data were in regard to the theme of accessibility. Those opposing viewpoints
centered around the lack of public awareness, group dependency, religious connotation,
and the requisite of a strong musical background to create true artistry.

**Pervasive vocabulary.** Analysis of the transcripts in their entirety yielded an
interesting common thread throughout. The participants continued to use the same words
to describe their experiences irrespective of the topic being discussed. The top three
words were: “**together,**” “**everyone/everybody,**” and “**whole**” (as in holistic or not
divided).

The word **together** was found a total of 39 times throughout the 11 transcripts,
and the distribution of the word **together** was in 10 out of 11 transcripts, making the
percentage of occurrence 91%. The word **everyone** or **everybody** was found a total of 26
times throughout the transcripts, and the distribution of the word **everyone** or **everybody**
was in nine out of the 11 transcripts, making the percentage of occurrence 82%. The
word **whole** was found a total of 17 times, in eight out of 11 transcripts, with a 73%
percentage occurrence rate.
What makes these percentages extraordinary is that there were other words present in the transcripts that likely had the same meaning as **together** such as “with” and “co-existence” but these were not included. Similarly, with the term **everybody**, the word “all” was not counted, nor was the word “holistic” included when the word **whole** was tallied. Including those words in the analysis would only further increase the pervasiveness. Also notable was the prevalence of the words “team” and “one” (*meaning united*) which were both found in 55% of the participants’ transcripts.

The importance of these percentages within this qualitative study lies in the overwhelming congruency of responses among participants. These handbell musicians were from a wide variety of contexts (geographic, age, occupation, type of ensemble) yet had at least two things in common—their exploration of embodied performance and their sense of musical communitas. A sympathetic resonance was discovered to exist among the participants without respect to age, position, or experience.

**Generalizability.** Qualitative studies are not traditionally generalizable, nor do they attempt to be. Myers (2000) however, suggests that they have “other redeeming features which makes them highly valuable in the education community,” and contends that generalizability “may have little relevance to the goals of the study and the reality of the situation.” In fact, there appears to be no agreement across the world of qualitative research that generalizability has any value (Chenail, 2010). There have been, however, suggested alternatives that could prove more valuable in qualitative research such as the non-statistical-probabilistic approach to generalization. Sandelowski (1997):

In qualitative research, emphasis is placed on idiographic or naturalistic
generalizations or conclusions that are drawn from and about cases. Indeed, much if not most of human knowledge is idiographic; that is, human beings make generalizations all the time from the particulars of their lives. In good description, the message comes not through explicit statement of generalities, but as concrete portrayal. Furthermore, the stories collected in most qualitative research encounters are renderings of the particular and concrete, but also of the universal and general. (p. 127)

In this type of approach the researcher’s responsibility is to provide a thick enough description of the phenomena that others are enabled to reach their own conclusion about whether transfer is a possibility. “… the burden of proof for transferability lies less with the investigator than with the reader. The investigator’s responsibility ends with providing sufficient descriptive data to make such similarity judgments possible” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 18).

That being said, the fact that the participants were from different parts of the country, of different ages, and members of different kinds of ensembles, and they agreed on the larger issues discussed suggests that there may be likenesses worth noting and investigating further.
Chapter Six: Discussion, Implications & Future Research

Being musical is a function of one’s whole being, in marked contrast to the silent spaces that frame both the disembodied abstractions of rational experience and the detached coolness of visual experience-realms in which we seem to live ever-increasing parts of our lives. Musical engagements put us in the world and in our bodies like nothing else does. — Wayne Bowman (2002, p. 59)

Discussion

For the participants in this study, handbells were unlike any other instrument they had played in that the bell provided a way for them to become an instrument rather than joining with an instrument to make music. Because of this, music was felt rather than just heard. The music making experience, as they described it, is one of musical communitas wherein two opposite types of experience—individual autonomy and collective identity—worked synergistically and simultaneously during performance. But for a couple of specific issues regarding accessibility, many of the participants also believed that handbells provided a voice for the musically voiceless, and a medium for a variety of group expressions from the beginner to the virtuoso ringer.

Embodiment and whole-body music making. The first research question was, “What are handbell musicians’ perceptions of embodied handbell ringing and/or embodied learning?” While participants did not use the term “embodied” to explain their physical experience while ringing, their statements clearly expressed a felt synthesis of body and bell. Steven summarized the experience when he said, “your body is your instrument” (personal communication, April 13, 2015), and Eleanor said, “the bells are
simply an extension of you” (personal communication, January 17, 2015). Kelly felt similarly, “It’s not just the notes. It’s now me, it’s my body, it’s my soul, it’s my whole person that is being put into the music with bells” (personal communication, January 17, 2015).

Ann made a distinction between handbells and her other instrument, the cello, when she said, “I feel very at-one with the instrument” as opposed to feeling “together-with” her cello (personal communication, March 14, 2015). “The body is required to be expressive and communicate gesturally with other members,” Bryan said, and he did that by “engag[ing] muscles differently based on the sound that [he is] trying to create” (personal communication, April 13, 2015). Ethan also spoke about what is experienced when you are required to embody strong force as well as delicate gentleness, and how it “makes you think about how directly connected your body is to the sound” (personal communication, May 3, 2015).

Eleanor’s attitude about handbells was almost anthropomorphic in that she believed handbells have “potential” that can only be reached through whole-body investment (personal communication, January 17, 2015). This attitude may spring from the feeling of being at-one with the instrument, and that the potential she referred to is really that of the individual herself. I suggest that an individual’s musical potential can only be reached through intentional, whole-body, embodied practice. “Through movement of the whole body, music is felt, experienced, and expressed; reciprocally, the movements express what the participants hear, feel, understand, and know” (Juntunen, 2016, p. 142). In other words, the involvement of the whole-body is a necessary
component in understanding how music is felt and expressed.

Consistent throughout was the participants’ awareness of embodied music making through their perception of being at-one with, instead of together with, the handbell. They identified their own bodies as the instrument with the bell being a resonating extension of it. The body itself is required to embody gentleness or strength with the bell then responding softly or loudly accordingly. With a handle that seems to “melt into” one’s hand as they played, the handbell provided the participants with the opportunity to become the music they create. This is consistent with Juntunen and Hyvonen (2004) who state,

[M]usical understanding as a habit of action means that the body understands what, for example, a musical phrase means in practice and is able to perform that phrase vocally, instrumentally, or in movement. As I play a musical phrase on an instrument, I experience at every stage of movement the fulfillment of an intention which is not directed at my instrument as an object, but is incorporated into my bodily space. Thus, the musical action is not only a means of showing musical understanding; it is the bodily understanding of a musical phenomenon as a habit of action. (p. 204)

In this sense, the handbell ceased to be an object of musical production and the body became the manifestation of the musical understanding.

Another issue of embodiment was expressed in the participants’ perception that the instrument seemed to be “alive,” fluid, and took on its own identity depending on the personalities of the ringers. Kelly said, “it’s as if all of you are breathing together, your
hearts are beating together, and your minds are one” (personal communication, January 17, 2015). Ann said that when handbell musicians came together to ring, they produced something fresh each time. “Everybody brings their different aspects to the table and it becomes something new” (personal communication, March 14, 2015). A new sound is made each time they perform because the music was created through the bodies of fluid people who brought to the music making process their personal emotional assets and liabilities. If the body is the instrument, and the body is controlled by thoughts and emotions, then it is possible for a different “instrument” to show up at each performance. In this sense, the ensemble is alive, and the music it produces is a reflection of its members at their deepest level.

This concept closely parallels previous findings of embodied learning in adult education, as Morris and Beckett (2004) found that adult learners brought their entire experiential selves—their experience, knowledge, and skills—to the learning environment. Instead of the “spaces of enclosure” imposed by traditional learning environments, embodied learning:

flourishes in the interstices of family, community, and work life and is shaped by [the participants’] cultural, socio-economic, and historical circumstances. These adult learners do not re-present meaning, but rather collaborate in creating meaning, thus opening the possibility of determining their own learning paths. (Morris & Beckett, 2004, p. 128)

Essentially, the ensemble was an organic manifestation of the individuals’ embodied contribution to the music making process. Therefore, in this study, embodiment or whole-
body music making was experienced in the perception that the musician was the instrument because they were at-one-with the handbell instead of together-with, and in the perception that the handbell ensemble embodied an anthropomorphic nature as a living, breathing organism.

**Musical communitas.** The second research question was, “What are handbell musicians’ perceptions of functioning as one unified instrument?” What was revealed was that this question evoked at least three different issues with regard to “one-ness”: one instrument played by many, deep level of communication, and the necessity of good relationships.

The first issue was the functional structure of the ensemble. In other words, the very nature of a handbell ensemble requires what Turner (2009) referred to as the “essential We” (p. 137) or the necessity of people to view one another as equals. Bryan described it this way, “it’s a group of people bringing one instrument to life to create the music” (personal communication, April 13, 2015). The dualistic relationship between one’s autonomous responsibility to the process, and the collective mind-set required to be artistic, was expressed in numerous ways. He went on to say, “you have to have a unified vision, then you have to coordinate with everybody to make that vision happen” (personal communication, April 13, 2015). Laura also felt that togetherness was foundational to a good performance. Laura spoke about it in terms of having a “group mind” (personal communication, January 17, 2015). “[It is a] combination of being an individual musician and yet part of one instrument that’s comprised of many people” (Connie, personal communication, April 13, 2015). Connie also said that, “there’s a real dependency on
everybody pulling their own weight … [and] everybody’s got the same value” (personal communication, April 13, 2015). Ethan offered a similar statement, “the dependence that the rest of the group has on you in a musical line far exceeds the responsibility that you would have in any other kind of musical ensemble” (personal communication, May 3, 2015).

Dependency fosters vulnerability, and vulnerability brings us to the second issue raised by participants—the heightened level of communication required to ring artistically. David said, “bells really forces you to open up and express, you know, if I’m having a problem here or on a certain passage, it’s important to express that to your stand partner and to people around you [so that] they can help you more” (personal communication, May 3, 2015). “This delicate ‘agreeing to help one another’ is a prime component of communitas” (Turner, 2012, p. 48).

Vulnerability was seen as a freeing sensation that was not impeded by a sense of competition. Ethan said that the structure of the ensemble, “allows you to be as vulnerable musically as you can be in a musical ensemble because there is no direct competition in handbells” (personal communication, May 3, 2015). Vulnerability was found not only to be required at the cognitive level, but also the physiological level as well. The heightened sense of communication that the participants referred to was not only verbal, but gestural as well. Bryan spoke about the need to be willing to be physically vulnerable with his body,

You also work in very close quarters …. You’re right next to each other bumping elbows with people. You need to be able to share what you have in front of you.
You might not be able to execute your part entirely yourself, and so you need to have people next to you to help you” (personal communication, April 13, 2015). Gestural communication played a significant role in handbell ensemble ringing, and could be understood through the concept of bodily action and reaction as a form of social understanding. Tanaka (2015) explains, “The most primary form of social understanding is to directly grasp another’s actions through one’s own body and find one’s own possibility of actions in another’s body” (p. 463). This reciprocal relationship of bodies communicating with each other through movement was foundational to successful ensemble handbell ringing. David said that, “you’re not just learning by yourself” (personal communication, May 3, 2015). There are others around you who are invested in your success. If they are not, and you do not succeed, then all fail. Because music making in ensemble ringing cannot happen aside from one’s body finding meaning through other bodies’ actions, we can infer from Emig (2001) that embodied learning—and in this study, embodied music making—provided an avenue for people to “know themselves in ways only interaction with others can provide” and reminded them of the joy of the “human pace” (p. 280). This human pace was being created and felt in real time as handbell musicians moved together in the music making process.

Along with a heightened level of communication came the need to be in good relationship with fellow musicians, the third issue. Higashi (2011), spoke of the need to be in good relationship and spoke of the need to solidify and bond based on relational identification, not geographic, as in seen community. This type of bond may not necessarily be a requirement in other types of ensembles, but the participants felt that it
was vitally important in this medium. As Laura said:

In an orchestral environment, each instrument or grouping of instruments plays lines. You know, a piccolo will have a line to play, and if the piccolo player doesn’t like the flutist, so what, really. I mean as long as the piccolo player knows when to come in, and how to put the nuance into it that needs to be there, all of their notes will show up and be there nice and smooth. With handbells, because you sometimes will have a dozen people playing notes in a line, the closeness that’s required, the meeting of minds that’s required to be able to do that is, to me, on a completely different level than any kind of orchestral or band environment. (personal communication, January 17, 2015).

Emily said, “you have to be very close, not only musically with those people but close in relationship with those people” (personal communication, May 3, 2015). Ethan expressed a similar thought, “I think it’s one of the most pure forms of musical camaraderie you can find in the music world” (personal communication, May 3, 2015). Eleanor, who identified as a “multiple” when speaking about what it feels like to be a handbell musician was even more direct in her answer when she said, “if you’re friends, you feel things better” (personal communication, January 17, 2015). Ann stressed the effect that social disconnect can have on handbell artistry, “You have to [have] an investment in the other people that are around you, an investment in who they are … and if we’re separated socially, it can separate us musically” (personal communication, March 14, 2015). Jill stated what it felt like when there was a strong sense of community, “[My handbell ensemble] has been like a family to me … and when we do it well, we are all uplifted”
Communitas breaks down the barriers that separate people and functions like a “kind of leveler” that “strips away” rigid distinctions (DeChaine, 2002, p. 93). In a recent conversation a colleague expressed this exact sentiment when he said that handbells are a “neutralizer” with regard to the disarming of individual ego and classification of mastery. Everyone contributes equally, without the distinction of concertmaster, first chair, or soloist, and therefore is valued equally. Equality and inclusiveness promotes personal investment in each other, which contributes to the overall wellbeing and vitality of the ensemble. This is also very similar to Turner’s (2009) conception of the “essential We” (p. 137).

Kelly spoke about the relationship between the musical execution of notes and the emotional interdependence required by comparing handbell ringing to the hocket technique wherein members are depending on each other to create a musical line that is usually carried by a single person in an orchestral setting: “it’s a closer social connection [than in an orchestra]. It’s not the same because you’re not relying on each other to complete a musical line like you are in handbells, because it’s hocket” (personal communication, January 17, 2015). The ensemble handbell musician is only successful when depending on others.

Davidson’s (2004) concept of three bodies can each be seen in the participants’ understanding of embodiment and collective orientation. The first is the body-self in which we identify as an individual. The second level is the social body that mediates the world and responds to its environment, and the third is the political body that complies
with outside expectations. The handbell musicians in this study identified as individuals with regard to personal responsibility to the music making process, as a receptor and responder to bodily gestures, and as a collective with regard to functioning as a single unit. DeChaine (2002) explained the connection between embodiment and collective orientation this way:

For the student of performance, an embodied understanding can help to explain, in Victor Turner’s terms, the liminal character of musical experience, bodies coming together in spontaneous communitas, the promise and risk of both individual and social transformation, aided and abetted by the consciousness participants share and the spaces they inhabit. (pp. 81–82)

In other words the handbell musicians in this study experienced a shared consciousness as their bodies came together in spontaneous musical communitas during music making.

Laura’s explanation of how she learned how to read music through ringing resonates with Kontos’ (2014) description of embodiment, as musical cognition resides “below the threshold of cognition” (p. 115), and testifies to the body’s foundational, not subordinate, status in music making and learning. Laura was not even quite sure how music reading happened other than from physically being in different musical spaces around the table and seeing how those different parts came together to create one musical idea. Music reading skills were being obtained “below the threshold of cognition” through the body’s central orientation in performance. Therefore, in this study, musical communitas was experienced by the participants due to the functional structure of the ensemble, in its simultaneous autonomy and united mind-set, in the verbal and gestural
communication that took place at a vulnerable level, and in the relational unity that nurtured success.

**Accessibility.** Finally, the third research question was, “How are handbells unique with regard to their accessibility?” Accessibility was recognized on at least three different levels: *functional accessibility, social accessibility,* and *compositional accessibility.*

“Universal design” can be seen in its functional accessibility through the qualities of *simple and intuitive design, tolerance for error,* and *low physical effort* (Burgstahler, 2015). Although the participants did not use the term universal design, their responses reflected its ease of function. Its tuned casting, its single dimension clapper system, and its limited range of notes per person, made it an accessible instrument at any level of musical knowledge or skill. This description is reminiscent of universal design whose principles “place a high value on diversity, equality, and inclusiveness” (Burgstahler, 2015, p. 2). Kelly said, “you don’t really need to know anything about music at all to play bells to get started” (personal communication, January 17, 2015).

Ethan’s response reflected how the ease of function created a positive experience not only for the ringer but for him, the director,

Everything’s always in tune, so it feels great. … I can get a really awesome result on day one, and that the kids can be really excited on day one is the most important. … They all walk away from that feeling really accomplished, and I walk away feeling really accomplished as well. (personal communication, May 3, 2015)

For Eleanor the functional accessibility had great meaning because, “you’re giving them
a tool to start learning music” (personal communication, January 17, 2015). For Eleanor, handbells’ ease of function provided an opportunity for anyone to take that first step in learning music and becoming part of an ensemble.

Functional accessibility was then followed by the second level—social accessibility—wherein people of diverse backgrounds, personalities, ages, and abilities come together to create one unified sound. The “universal design” qualities that relate to social accessibility are its equitable use and flexibility of use (Burgstahler, 2015). Bryan said, “They are accessible in terms of having a wide variety of personality styles come together to create music, they’re accessible, especially to people who tend to be quieter, or more introverted because you are not using our voice” (personal communication, April 13, 2015). Steven expressed similarly that it is “less personal than someone singing” (personal communication, April 13, 2015). For someone who does not participate in music making opportunities because he or she lacks confidence that their singing voice would be accepted, or for someone who cannot afford to rent or purchase an instrument, handbells can provide an opportunity to become part of a social structure that they may not otherwise have. This social structure consists of uniting people of differing personalities, races or ethnicities, religious orientations, economic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and any other divisions that may otherwise separate us. This concept of providing a voice to the musically voiceless was powerful for those who expressed this sentiment.

Not only can handbells bring people of different cultural backgrounds together, but they also can bring people of different ages together. Multi-generational ensembles
are common, especially in churches. Eleanor shared, “[some of] the groups that I’ve had have been multi-generational—anywhere from 10, 11, 12 year olds and somebody who’s 70. … And it was rewarding to see them be able to create something together and have a venue to be together” (personal communication, January 17, 2015). Young and old together in one goal is a valuable experience not only in music making, but in life.

Finally, David expressed that the instrument’s social accessibility provided for a productive and supportive learning environment. “I think that’s what makes bells accessible, because it’s not just by yourself. You’re not picking it up and trying to learn it [without] … someone there to guide you, or actually a lot of people to guide you” (personal communication, May 3, 2015). Unlike other instruments, ensemble handbell ringing is learned in cooperation with others, not in a rehearsal room by one’s self. Kaikkonen’s (2016) concept of inclusive music education and what makes it accessible to all echoes David’s comments: “[I]nclusive music education [recognizes] that music is a central aspect of humanity and that it is the responsibility of educators to honor and support each learner’s potential” (p. 1). Within this model, accessibility consists of the following areas: “attitudinal, physical, sensory, informational, social and cultural, and financial accessibility. Also noteworthy is the accessibility connected with decision making” (Kaikkonen, 2016, p. 4). Within the traditional music education classroom, attitudinal and informational accessibility comes directly from the teacher, but in the handbell ensemble inclusivity and support are inherent qualities within its very structure.

The third level of accessibility expressed was that of compositional access, wherein the universal design qualities of perceptible information and tolerance for error
are inherent in handbell ringing (Burgstahler, 2015). Unlike with other instruments, handbell musicians are, at all times, reading from a full conductor’s score. They have in front of them the ability to see how their part fits into the entire work. Laura referred to this accessible feature as something that helped her learn how to read, “I was able to create that holistic image of the music and equate it to what was on the page, [and] that was a huge change in my ability to play the instrument well…” (personal communication, January 17, 2015).

In addition to being able to see how their part fits with the rest of the fabric of the music—universal design’s quality of “perceptible information” (Burgstahler, 2015, p. 2)—handbell musicians are also given the opportunity to perform in one voice (treble, middle, bass) for one piece, and a different voice for another piece. This aspect of accessibility reflects universal design’s quality of “flexibility in use” (Burgstahler, 2015, p. 2). In essence, they have the opportunity to play flute in one piece and cello in another, giving them experience with melodic as well as dominant to tonic movement. Laura stated that this aspect of ringing fostered her reading skills, “[I learned how to read music partly by] moving around the table to different assignments instead of just being stuck [in one position] all the time—having to move to different locations and playing different assignments around the table” (personal communication, January 17, 2015).

Another consideration with regard to accessibility is how the choice of repertoire can affect the acceptance or rejection of handbells as an inclusive instrument. A search of the website of one handbell music distributor showed the following classifications of music: Broadway tunes, church or concert, contemporary Christian, Disney tunes, folk
music, humorous, international music, Irish titles, movie titles, original composition, patriotic, American Indian titles, classical music, hymn tunes, jazz, rock and pop music, opera titles, secular, and spirituals (Jeffers Handbell Supply, Inc., 2017). Some ensembles perform a variety of music, while others, like the youth ensemble I visited, chose to concentrate on performing pop music that would be recognizable to young audiences. Because there is such a wide variety of musical styles arranged for handbells, the ensembles can draw musicians with diverse musical interests, as well as reach audiences of different musical preferences.

In conclusion, I would like to bring to the reader’s attention that beyond the handbell’s intrinsic qualities of functional, social, and compositional accessibility, adaptive measures have been taken within the field to further increase the accessibility of handbells to certain populations. As I mentioned in chapter one, Melmark of Berwyn, Pennsylvania, a comprehensive residential program, provided a handbell program using adaptive notation for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Melmark, 2016). The Joybells of Melmark have been performing around their region since the 1970s, as well as at the White House. At the time of this study, the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, MA, also had a handbell ensemble that performs at yearly concerts. Handbells were instituted at the Perkins School in 1935 by a Perkins graduate and still flourish today (Perkins School for the Blind, n.d.). Finally, the Handbell Musicians of America currently provides a module for handbells and special populations as a part of their certification process (Handbell Musicians of America, 2017a), with D. Linda
McKechnie as their instructor on adaptive notation and other strategies that reach special populations with handbells.

Therefore, accessibility was experienced in the functional attributes of the instrument, which made it socially inclusive to anyone who would like to play, and in the compositional accessibility provided to each musician through access to the full score. Each of these attributes was reflected in many of the qualities of universal design—equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, size and space for approach and use (Burgstahler, 2015)—and in the intentionality of universal design learning for music education—inclusive class climate, cooperative learning, safe physical environment, flexible and encouraging instructional methods, accessibility of materials, regular feedback and assessments, and accommodations where needed (Kaikkonen, 2016).

**Implications**

For the participants in this study, ensemble handbell ringing felt different as compared to other musical experiences. For me, it has always been difficult to describe exactly what feels different about it, but by studying the specific phenomena of embodiment, musical communitas, and accessibility I was able to begin to attach some concepts to those indefinable feelings. These concepts may be useful in providing insights for embodied learning, musical communitas, and accessibility as experienced in music education practices.

**Embodied practice as a model for music teacher education.** “Embodied learning” is seen as knowledge obtained through bodily movement that provides a means
of developing skills, competencies and understanding (Juntunen & Hyvonen, 2004), and in this case musical knowledge. In this study, embodied practice was evidenced in the transmutation of self into music, the body as instrument, the outward expression of the music inside, the physical expression of dynamic qualities, and in corporate music making that is likened to a living, breathing organism. Embodied music learning models have been shown to be effective in identity formation (Ferm, 2008), managing the world (Alerby & Ferm, 2005), and in embodiment of musical knowledge (Alerby & Ferm, 2005). Pedagogies for embodied music learning such as Dalcroze, Orff-Schulwerk, and Laban Movement Theory applications to choral singing, conducting, string instruction, and handbell artistry, share a common philosophy that the body must be central to music learning. Although we cannot expect that undergraduate music institutions will abandon their cognitive emphasis in learning, it would be beneficial for them to adopt the standpoint that the body is, in fact, intelligent, and that “practical, embodied knowledge, [which is] quite remote and distinct from discursive knowledge” (Kontos, 2014, p. 114) is a foundational, not supplemental, complement to its curriculum. All human knowledge is fed from corporeal roots because the mind is biological and embodied. The brain cannot know anything apart from what the body experiences in the world (Bowman, 2004).

Educating music teachers to approach their craft from an embodied perspective, and to teach from that embodied standpoint, correctly orders the learning process. Bowman (2004) said that the body experiences the music and then the brain, in a sense, recognizes what the body already knows. Providing undergraduate music students with foundational learning in expressive movement and in philosophies of embodied practice
would provide them with a balanced perspective on music learning that would allow THEM to teach and perform from a position of holistic understanding that honors the corporeal roots of all knowledge. In this study, embodied learning was highly personal and fostered competencies such as “being present and engaged” with the music making process and others (Ferm, 2008, p. 369). Therefore, in addition to ordering the learning process to build upon embodied experience, it is important for pre-service teachers to model a more holistic type of music making in order to communicate and connect with their students.

**Musical communitas as a model for choral and instrumental ensemble participation.** It is widely known that students who participate in musical ensembles in school experience a sense of belonging and camaraderie. However, these choral or instrumental settings tend to be fundamentally at odds with inclusivity and equality due to their recognition of section leaders, first chairs, soloists, or their physical placement within the ensemble. Each of these practices is in direct opposition to members feeling as if they are equally valued, and promote a competitive environment within the ensemble. In this study, the participants’ perspective on ensemble participation was one of “seamless unity” (Turner, 2012, p. 3)—simultaneous autonomy and collective identity, equality between members, a deeper sense of connectedness, and a commitment to relational harmony.

Communitas possesses a different “kind of power” than competition promotes (Turner, 2012, p. xii). Turner (2012), states:

In communitas there is a loss of ego. One’s pride in oneself becomes irrelevant. In
the group, all are in unity, seamless unity, so that even joshing is cause for delight and there is a lot of laughter. The benefits of communitas are quick understanding, easy mutual help, and long-term ties with others. (p. 3)

With competitive music making opportunities there is hierarchy and pride; with musical communitas there is “democracy and humility” (Turner, 2012, p. 219). In competition, even friends can find themselves at odds with each other, while in communitas people experience a “state of alignment” (Turner, 2012, p. 197). Communitas provides for a nurturing and empowering environment for ensemble music making. Therefore, music education practice stands to benefit from restructuring the ensemble, whatever the instrument, from that of a competitive-based environment to a communitas-based environment. Its members, then, would encounter the empowering standard of equality and mutual respect as part of their music learning experience, as was described by the participants in this study.

**Ensemble handbell ringing as an alternative or complement to traditional music education.** A wide variety of adaptive strategies constitute the backbone of inclusive music education, and different forms of accessibility play a major role in those adaptive measures (Lapka, 2016). Students who have benefited from such accommodations, have, in essence, succeeded in spite of traditional music making. In the quest for accessibility in music education, what if educators were to explore opportunities where “full participation” (Kaikkonen, 2016, p. 2) by disabled populations did not necessarily require special accommodations?

At this point, I would like to remind the reader of some phrases or concepts that
appeared multiple times throughout the findings chapter of this study. They are inclusion, equality, diversity, empowerment, cooperation, everyone, full participation, part of the artistic process, experience success, interaction skills, the community realizes the potential of the individual, and individual and collective experience. What is interesting to realize is that these words and phrases also appear in an article by Kaikkonen (2016) who discussed ways to create inclusive general music education. The handbell musicians in this study used the same words to describe their experiences as those researchers who advocate for inclusive music education. Ensemble handbell ringing is inherently accessible when it is made available outside of religious contexts to music learners in schools. It fulfills many of the goals of inclusive music education, as well as those of music education in general. Therefore, the inclusion of handbells in the general music curriculum stands to provide a viable means to expand music making opportunities to a wider-range of students who might otherwise be excluded.

**Future Research**

Because ensemble handbell ringing had not been studied from a psychological nor phenomenological perspective, future research is warranted to uncover deeper perspectives of the perceptions of embodiment, musical communitas, and accessibility as understood by handbell musicians.

**The need for discourse studies.** While we have learned how ensemble handbell ringing is positively perceived by those who engage in it, it would be helpful to understand how and in what ways ensemble handbell ringing might positively influence one’s personal growth, greater health, and overall wellbeing. This might be best studied
through handbell programs situated within prisons where it could be determined to what extent participation might result in changes in the participants’ self-talk. One such program has been in existence since 2002 at the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, a maximum-security facility in Troy, Virginia (Wheeler, 2006). The group members named the ensemble, “Metanoia” which is Greek for “change.” One of the women wrote:

Handbells—the simple act of picking up each bell, flicking my wrist and hearing its sweet ring—is to step out of my shackles for an all too brief moment. Passion, strength, beauty, love and peace sing out in every note as they weave together to form my tapestry of comfort. Though I coin myself “the happiest person in prison,” there is much unspoken pain, loneliness, and depression behind those words. Handbells lift those unspoken ghosts and allow me to truly be happy, to truly be free. (Wheeler, 2006, n.p.)

Therefore, a study of this or a similar program would provide additional insight on the benefits of ensemble handbell ringing with incarcerated individuals.

**A closer look at the influence of the director.** Although this study showed handbell ensemble ringing to possess qualities of embodiment, musical communitas, and accessibility, it would be interesting to study to what extent the handbell director might impact these perceived qualities. Does the handbell lose its embodied possibilities under the direction of a conductor who does not see the body as intelligent? Does the communitas-orientation draw in directors who are congruent with its ideals? Or is it possible for a director to make an otherwise accessible instrument inaccessible? Will
handbell ensemble ringing’s success as an alternative for music educators depend on the attitudinal compass of the educator, or does the inherent inclusiveness of the instrument hold benefits in either case? Therefore, it would be valuable to compare the perceptions of participants working with directors with differing approaches to see to what extent the director might influence each of the phenomena studied herein.

**Ensemble ringing as a model for peer mentoring.** Peer mentoring can be a function of ensemble handbell ringing because its practice requires that everyone succeed. Helping, and even teaching, the person next to you is a common occurrence in ensemble ringing, and could serve as a model for choral, orchestral, band, or other ensembles. For instance, in a jazz setting, Goodrich (2007) found that “Peer mentoring contributed to the success of [the] ensemble by aiding in a heightened musical development rate of the students, making rehearsal time more efficient for the director, and by enhancing the social growth of the students.” Future studies that focused on this collaborative, instead of competitive, relationship may further support how educators might create these same kinds of learning environments in their own rehearsals.

**Ensemble handbell ringing and Dalcroze Eurythmics.** Developing one’s “musical potential through the medium of his own living and moving body, which becomes, in effect, a musical instrument” (Juntunen, 2002, p. 85) not only describes the potential that handbell ringing possesses, but is a direct quote from Juntunen (2002), a scholar of Dalcroze Eurythmics. Swiss composer Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950) identified the absence of “emotions, sensations, and experiences” from music education (Juntunen, 2016, p. 2), so in 1906, he published his *Méthode Jaques-Dalcroze*, which
later became referred to as “eurhythmics” (Juntunen, 2016). In Dalcroze education, “Students are asked to show in movement, in a concrete kinaesthetic manner, what is taking place in music” (Juntunen, 2002, p. 86). “Bodily skills are [then] developed in order to create a finer and subtler instrument for musical expression” (Juntunen, 2002, p. 85).

Because ensemble ringing and Dalcroze Eurythmics are based in the same philosophical viewpoint of “creating a dynamic partnership between sensing, musical actions, thinking, feeling, and bodily movement” (Juntunen, 2002, p. 75), it would be interesting to see how students of Eurythmics would experience ensemble handbell ringing, and if each could be used to complement the goals of the other. Embodiment in handbell ringing could further be studied through the lens of Eurythmics, while Dalcroze could benefit from incorporating handbells into its movement exploration exercises. Each may prove to be a powerful ally in the goal of developing and refining the faculties of the whole person, “especially the ones used to engage in music” (Juntunen, 2016, p. 142).

**Final Thoughts**

The process of sitting with handbell musicians in their spaces, listening to their perceptions of an art form that they are passionate about, and creating a narrative that honors their experiences, has been illuminating, galvanizing, and quite humbling. Accessibility has been seen to be ubiquitous in this art form, and was evidenced in different ways depending on the environment.

Handbells can serve music education in a unique way because of its non-competitive practice, inherent advocacy for learning, and opportunity for embodied music
making. However, handbells’ characteristics could also serve to provide a basis for educators of other instruments to explore the possibilities of whole-body music making, musical communitas as learning environment, and greater accessibility. Are there ways of instruction that would allow orchestral musicians to experience music making as “one-with” instead of “together-with” with their instruments? What can educators do to promote a more equal and collaborative, rather than competitive, environment in their ensembles? And finally, with the handbell ensemble as a model, are there steps that can be taken in orchestral, band, and choral ensembles that would increase the functional, social, and compositional accessibility within those ensembles?

It would seem that answering these questions would bring us closer to fulfilling some of music education’s current values and goals of “educating the whole student” that include collaboration, communication, and emotional awareness (NAfME, n.y., n.p.), as well as promote a more holistic approach to music teacher education.
APPENDIX A

MENC Commission on Teacher Education in 1972 (MENC, 1972)

With regard to musical qualities, all music educators must be able to:

1. Perform with musical understanding and technical proficiency;
2. Play accompaniments;
3. Sing;
4. Conduct;
5. Supervise and evaluate the performance of others;
6. Organize sounds for personal expression;
7. Demonstrate an understanding of the elements of music through original composition and improvisation in a variety of styles;
8. Demonstrate the ability to identify and explain compositional choices of satisfactory and less satisfactory nature;
9. Notate and arrange sounds for performance in school situations;
10. Identify and explicate compositional devices as they are employed in all musics;
11. Discuss the affective results of compositional devices;
12. Describe the means by which the sounds used in music are created.
APPENDIX B


1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music;
2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music;
3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.
4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
5. Reading and notating music.
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.
Appendix C

Interview Schedule

1. What does it mean to be a handbell musician? What does it feel like?

2. What does it feel like to be part of an ensemble?

3. What makes handbells a unique instrument both musically and socially?

4. What makes handbells accessible to different kinds of people?

5. In what ways do handbells allow you to “speak” musically using your entire body (embodied performance)?
Appendix D

Invitation Letter

Kimberlee F. Strepka
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LabanBells@gmail.com

July, 2014

Dear ____________:

My name is Kimberlee Strepka, and I am a doctoral candidate in music education at Boston University. My desire is that my dissertation contribute to the research that many of our colleagues have asked for when trying to build a case for handbells in education.

Scholarship speaks directly to the potency of using a body-based approach in a number of contemporary educational goals such as equal access, collaboration, critical pedagogy, and gender studies, and in teaching skills such as hearing, feeling, understanding, reproducing, remembering and inventing. Although the embodiment of music is thought to be the highest form of artistry, there remains a lack of acceptance of the body as a foundational component in music learning. The experiences and practices of handbell musicians have the potential to provide music educators with insight into the strengths and benefits of music learning through body-based musicking.

Because your ensemble, ____________, exemplifies embodied performance, I would like to include you and two of your members in my study, which is tentatively titled “Handbelling”: A Somatic Alternative for Contemporary Music Education. My first choice would be to visit your ensemble in your space within the next 12 months and interview the three of you personally. Alternatively, we could Skype or conduct the interviews by telephone. Interviews will be audio taped to ensure accuracy and will be transcribed by me. All names will be kept in strict confidentiality, and aliases will be used when the study is written. A formal assent form required by Boston University will be provided to you if you agree to participate. Your ensemble will also be provided with a copy of the completed dissertation once published.

Here is a sample of some of the questions I may ask:

What does it mean to be a handbell musician? What does it feel like? What does it feel
like to be part of an ensemble?

What makes handbells a unique instrument both musically and socially?

What makes handbells accessible to different kinds of people?

In what ways do handbells allow you to “speak” musically using your entire body (embodied performance)?

Please let me know by August 1, 2014, if you would like to participate. Thank you for your kind consideration.

Very sincerely,

Kimberlee F. Strepka
Doctoral Candidate
Boston University
References


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Curriculum Vitae

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Education

**BM, Music Education** (Choral), 1989
The Hartt School of Music, West Hartford, CT

**MM, Music Education** (Research – Handbells), 2009
University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA

**Additional Graduate Studies** (1989–2007)
Group Vocal Technique & Conducting: Choral Institute
St. Moritz, Switzerland

Group Vocal Technique: Westminster Choir College
Princeton, NJ

Choral Conducting: Central Connecticut State University
Rhythm Pedagogy: The Hartt School of Music, W. Hartford, CT
Advanced Handbells: Westminster Choir College, Princeton, NJ
Introduction to Laban: Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies, New York, NY

Employment

**United Christian Academy**, Newport, VT (2014–present)
Chorus, Handchimes, and Handbells (Grades 2–12)

**Snyder Memorial Baptist Church**, Fayetteville, NC (2013–2014)
Handbell Director, Guest Choral/Orchestral Conductor

Handbell Program Founder/Director
Middle School and High School Handbell Ensembles

**University of Massachusetts**, Amherst, MA (2007–2009)
Department of Music Assistantship, Community Liaison
United Christian Academy, Newport, VT
Concert Bells (2004–2006)

Mount Hope Christian Center, Burlington, MA

First Assembly of God, Warren, OH

Pioneer Valley Christian Academy, Springfield, MA

Evangelical Covenant Church, Springfield, MA
Youth Vocal Choir Director (1989)


Publications


**Professional Activities**
- Collaborating Arranger with Dan Goeller Music
- Nationally Recognized Clinician, Handbell Musicians of America
- Trustee, Vermont Symphony Orchestra

**Educational and Professional Goals**
- Certification in Laban Movement Analysis
- Establishment of Community Music Projects
- Continued Publication of Handbell Compositions & Texts