

## Will Lennon drop a clanger?

The bell-ringing world is being challenged with new kinds of peals and John Lennon's greatest hit, says Emma Pomfret

Change ringing — as bell ringing is officially known — couldn't be more of a misnomer. Since its origins in the 17th century, this proudly peculiar English tradition has resisted change. Even though about 300 brand new peals are rung in England's churches every year, these remain firmly within the traditional style, conforming to the conventions laid down 400 years ago.

Next week, however, Leeds Parish Church will give the premieres of two very unconventional peals on its 13 bells, one by the English composer Gavin Bryars, the other by a French instrumentalist, Col-

leen, for the fuseleeds festival. More populist still, in May Liverpool Cathedral has agreed to an idea by the artist Cleo Evans to ring John Lennon's *Imagine* on its 12 bells. Can either newcomer dent tradition — and even attract new worshippers?

Composed by "outsiders", the Leeds commissions will sound daringly musical. "Normal church ringing is about rhythm and accuracy. It isn't a tune," says Steve Ollerton, the tower captain of the Leeds ringers.

For Bryars this is an opportunity to work inside a tradition while pushing it as far as he can. He is aiming to make his 30-minute piece deliberately melodic. "You can't do anything complex or chromatic — nothing Wagnerian," he says. But he can spice things up with various tricks: a muffled bell (the clapper is covered with sackcloth) and some Italian flare. Italian peals are more harmonic than their English counterparts, for instance allowing patterns to overlap.

Other composers have occasionally embraced bell ringing disciplines, too. Peter Maxwell Davies wrote *Stedman Caters*, his 1968 instrumental work, around the legendary *Stedman* pattern. But cross-over the other way is rare, and for good rea-

son. "It's impossible to control a bell accurately enough to ring a tune," says Sam Austin, the musical brains behind ringing *Imagine* at Liverpool Cathedral. Normally, ringers experience a delay of about five seconds between tugging the rope and hearing their bell ring several metres above. To reduce this, the ropes will be tied directly to the bell clappers instead of the metal wheels that usually wind and unwind the rope.

Austin, 23, whose father taught him to ring at the age of 7, also had to translate Lennon's notes into change ringing numbers. Ringers do not follow notes and they rarely have musical training. You don't need it to ring bells. On paper, a peal — called a method — looks like a Su Doku puzzle, columns of numbers arranged in a grid with hundreds of potential combinations. Peals can last for hours and ringers must frequently memorise every method. As Austin says: "It's more of a mathematical challenge than a musical one."

To get a feel for this challenge, I visit the ringers at St Magnus the Martyr in the City of London. Silent since the original bells were removed in the Blitz, St Magnus rang out a new set of 12 bells on Easter Day, paid



The new bells of St Magnus the Martyr in the City of London

for by donations (one ringer, Tim Joiner, bought the sixth bell for his wife, Rona, as a wedding present). Inside the chamber, the ringers appear trance-like in their concentration. The bell tower sways disconcertingly as each bell exerts up to 16 tonnes of force on each swing. Outside, the sound is glorious, rebounding off the City offices.

Might a bell tower blast of Lennon or

Bryars lure more of us inside the church? Liverpool Cathedral hopes its performance will "engage with all people, including those who do not usually interact with places of worship". It certainly sends out a rare, forward-thinking signal. But as long as those doing the ringing aren't convinced, the week-in, week-out business of bell peals is unlikely to alter.

"Ringers are so into their patterns — they're what makes ringing ringing," Austin says. For him, playing *Imagine* is nothing more than a novel distraction. "I don't think it will catch on," he adds.

Bell ringing isn't a dead art — some 40,000 ringers regularly play bells in England's 5,500 active church towers — but its enthusiasts are ageing. In the summer the Five Rings in Five Years campaign aims to attract young ringers in time for a mass ring at London 2012. But the new recruits are unlikely to ring in the Olympics with new, unconventional peals. Ringers, it seems, are too attached to their traditional ringing methods to let evolution get in the way. "We call it change ringing," Ollerton says, "but because it's been going for so long, nobody wants to change it."

**Leeds Parish Church bell ringing, April 25, 12.30pm (0113-213 7700; [www.fuseleeds.com](http://www.fuseleeds.com)). John Lennon's *Imagine* at Liverpool Cathedral, free, May 16, 9am ([www.futuresonic.com](http://www.futuresonic.com))**

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