“The Bells” by Edgar Allan Poe (1849): a speech choir arrangement

A teacher's arrangement for a class of about 40, used in a sample action research on speaking skills (an invented study). The poem is in the public domain; Poe's words and spellings are kept as first printed. The parts and loudness marks are the arrangement's own: change them to fit your class.

How to read the script

Solo	one voice; a different learner for each solo line
Light voices	the higher voices in the class (about a third)
Medium voices	the middle voices (about a third)
Dark voices	the lower voices (about a third)
All	every voice together (shown in bold)

Loudness: **pp** very soft; **p** soft; **mp** medium soft; **mf** medium loud; **f** loud; **ff** very loud. Group voices by how high or low they sound when the class reads a line together, not by sex.

I. Silver bells: merry and light, a sleigh ride on a winter night; brisk

Part	Line	Loudness
Solo	*Hear the sledges with the bells—* *One voice calls the poem in, like the first bell.*	mf (medium loud)
Light voices	Silver bells!	f (loud)
Medium voices	What a world of merriment their melody foretells!	mf (medium loud)
Light voices	How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, *Light voices on the repeated "tinkle": the word sounds like what it names.*	mp (medium soft)
Medium voices	In the icy air of night!	mp (medium soft)
Light voices	While the stars that oversprinkle	p (soft)
Light voices	All the heavens, seem to twinkle	p (soft)
Medium voices	With a crystalline delight;	mp (medium soft)
Dark voices	Keeping time, time, time, *Dark voices keep the beat on each "time", like a clock.*	mf (medium loud)
Dark voices	In a sort of Runic rhyme,	mp (medium soft)
All	**To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells** ***All together on the long word, every syllable clear: tin-tin-nab-u-la-tion.***	mf (medium loud)
All	**From the bells, bells, bells, bells,**	f (loud)
Light voices	Bells, bells, bells—	mf (medium loud)
All	**From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.**	mp (medium soft)

II. Golden bells: warm and happy, a wedding; flowing

Part	Line	Loudness
Solo	*Hear the mellow wedding-bells*	mp (medium soft)

Medium voices	Golden bells!	f (loud)
Medium voices	What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!	mf (medium loud)
Light voices	Through the balmy air of night	mp (medium soft)
All	**How they ring out their delight!—**	f (loud)
Medium voices	From the molten-golden notes,	mp (medium soft)
Light voices	And all in tune,	p (soft)
Medium voices	What a liquid ditty floats	mp (medium soft)
Solo	*To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats*	p (soft)
Light voices	On the moon!	pp (very soft)
Dark voices	Oh, from out the sounding cells,	mp (medium soft)
All	**What a gush of euphony voluminously wells!** ***The line grows as it goes: begin softer and arrive full on "voluminously wells".***	f (loud)
Medium voices	How it swells!	mf (medium loud)
Light voices	How it dwells	mp (medium soft)
Dark voices	On the Future!—how it tells	mp (medium soft)
Medium voices	Of the rapture that impels	mf (medium loud)
All	**To the swinging and the ringing** ***Internal rhyme ("swinging", "ringing"): let both words ring.***	mf (medium loud)
Light voices	Of the bells, bells, bells—	mf (medium loud)
Medium voices	Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,	mf (medium loud)
Dark voices	Bells, bells, bells—	mf (medium loud)
All	**To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!**	f (loud)

III. Brazen bells: terror, a fire alarm in the night; fast and urgent

Part	Line	Loudness
Solo	*Hear the loud alarum bells—* *A solo voice sounds the alarm before the whole choir answers.*	f (loud)
All	**Brazen bells!**	ff (very loud)
Dark voices	What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells! *Hear the t sounds repeat ("tale", "terror", "turbulency", "tells").*	f (loud)
Medium voices	In the startled ear of night	mf (medium loud)
Light voices	How they scream out their affright!	f (loud)

Medium voices	Too much horrified to speak,	mp (medium soft)
Light voices	They can only shriek, shriek, *Short and sharp: the light voices' highest, loudest moment.*	ff (very loud)
Solo	*Out of tune,*	mf (medium loud)
Medium voices	In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,	f (loud)
Dark voices	In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire,	f (loud)
Light voices	Leaping higher, higher, higher, *Each "higher" louder than the last.*	f (loud)
Medium voices	With a desperate desire,	f (loud)
Dark voices	And a resolute endeavour	mf (medium loud)
Solo	*Now—now to sit, or never,*	f (loud)
Medium voices	By the side of the pale-faced moon.	mp (medium soft)
All	**Oh, the bells, bells, bells!**	ff (very loud)
Dark voices	What a tale their terror tells	f (loud)
Solo	*Of Despair!*	f (loud)
All	**How they clang, and clash, and roar!** ***Three sound words, three hits: "clang", "clash", "roar".***	ff (very loud)
Dark voices	What a horror they outpour	f (loud)
Medium voices	On the bosom of the palpitating air!	mf (medium loud)
Solo	*Yet the ear, it fully knows,*	mp (medium soft)
Light voices	By the twanging *Light and dark voices trade the paired sound words, like bells answering each other.*	mf (medium loud)
Dark voices	And the clanging,	mf (medium loud)
Medium voices	How the danger ebbs and flows;	mp (medium soft)
Solo	*Yet the ear distinctly tells,*	mp (medium soft)
Light voices	In the jangling	mf (medium loud)
Dark voices	And the wrangling,	mf (medium loud)
Medium voices	How the danger sinks and swells,	mf (medium loud)
All	**By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells—**	f (loud)
Dark voices	Of the bells—	f (loud)
All	**Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,**	ff (very loud)
All	**Bells, bells, bells—**	ff (very loud)
All	**In the clamour and the clangour of the bells!**	ff (very loud)

IV. Iron bells: solemn and mournful, a funeral bell; slow

Part	Line	Loudness
Solo	*Hear the tolling of the bells—* *Slow down here: the tempo changes before the words do.*	p (soft)
Dark voices	Iron bells!	mf (medium loud)
Dark voices	What a world of solemn thought their monody compels!	mp (medium soft)
Light voices	In the silence of the night,	pp (very soft)
Medium voices	How we shiver with affright	p (soft)
Dark voices	At the melancholy menace of their tone! *Hear the m sounds ("melancholy menace"): keep them low and long.*	mp (medium soft)
Medium voices	For every sound that floats	p (soft)
Dark voices	From the rust within their throats	p (soft)
Solo	*Is a groan.*	pp (very soft)
Medium voices	And the people—ah, the people—	mp (medium soft)
Light voices	They that dwell up in the steeple,	p (soft)
Solo	*All alone,*	pp (very soft)
Dark voices	And who, tolling, tolling, tolling, *"Tolling, tolling, tolling" slow and even, like a bell swinging.*	mp (medium soft)
Dark voices	In that muffled monotone,	p (soft)
Medium voices	Feel a glory in so rolling	mp (medium soft)
All	**On the human heart a stone—**	mf (medium loud)
Light voices	They are neither man nor woman—	mp (medium soft)
Medium voices	They are neither brute nor human—	mp (medium soft)
Dark voices	They are Ghouls:—	f (loud)
Solo	*And their king it is who tolls:—*	mf (medium loud)
Dark voices	And he rolls, rolls, rolls,	mf (medium loud)
Dark voices	Rolls	mp (medium soft)
All	**A pæan from the bells!**	mf (medium loud)
Medium voices	And his merry bosom swells	mf (medium loud)
All	**With the pæan of the bells!**	f (loud)
Light voices	And he dances, and he yells;	f (loud)
Dark voices	Keeping time, time, time,	mf (medium loud)

Dark voices	In a sort of Runic rhyme,	mp (medium soft)
Medium voices	To the pæan of the bells—	mf (medium loud)
Light voices	Of the bells:—	mp (medium soft)
Dark voices	Keeping time, time, time,	mf (medium loud)
Dark voices	In a sort of Runic rhyme,	mp (medium soft)
Medium voices	To the throbbing of the bells—	mf (medium loud)
All	**Of the bells, bells, bells—**	mf (medium loud)
Light voices	To the sobbing of the bells:—	p (soft)
Dark voices	Keeping time, time, time,	mp (medium soft)
Dark voices	As he knells, knells, knells,	mp (medium soft)
Medium voices	In a happy Runic rhyme,	mp (medium soft)
Medium voices	To the rolling of the bells—	p (soft)
All	**Of the bells, bells, bells:—**	p (soft)
Dark voices	To the tolling of the bells—	p (soft)
All	**Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,**	p (soft)
All	**Bells, bells, bells—**	pp (very soft)
All	**To the moaning and the groaning of the bells.** ***The softest line of the piece, and the slowest.***	pp (very soft)

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