

Handbells

An Overview of the Art

Using them creatively in Worship

Reading some useful pieces

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A Brief History of the Handbell

Handbell ringing developed in England over 300 years ago as an outgrowth of the practice of change ringing on church tower bells. The mathematical patterns for change ringing needed to be rehearsed, so rather than disturb the entire town for rehearsal, small bells cast in bronze were developed. Later, ringers organized to play musical selections on these rehearsal bells also.

In the US, handbell groups toured on the Chautauqua vaudeville circuits. It was revived by Margaret Shurcliff of Boston in the early decades of the 20th century. By 1937 a guild was founded in New England and then in 1954 the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR) was founded.

Today there are thousands of groups in churches, schools and communities throughout the country.

Manufacturers

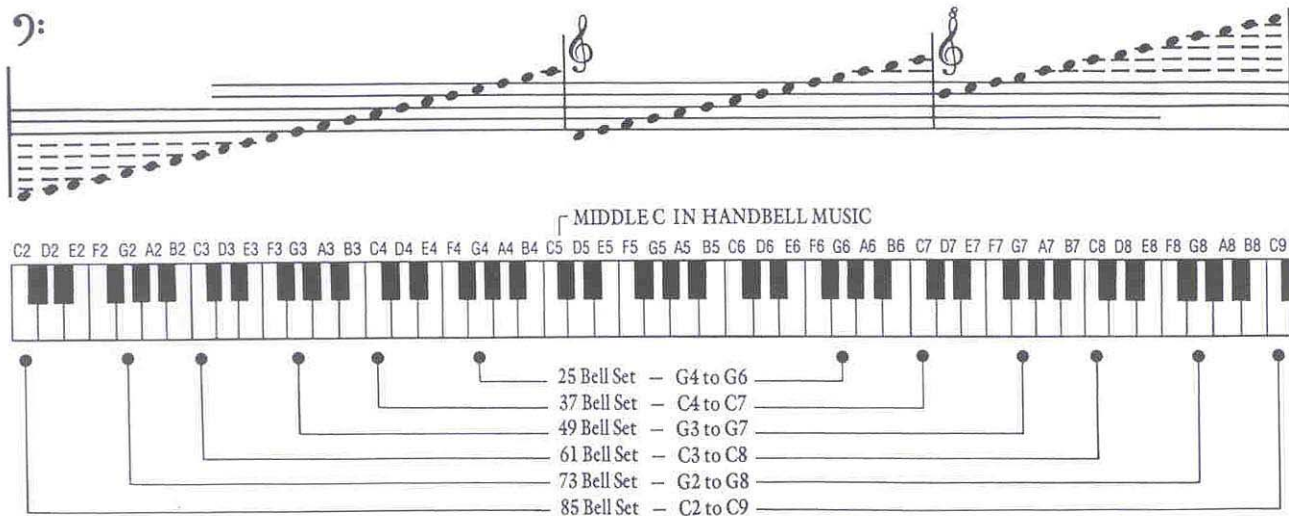
American Manufacturers include Malmark and Schulmerich, both of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The English firms of Whitechapel of London, England and John Taylor of Loughborough, Leicestershire, England are also still manufacturing handbells.

General Information

Handbell castings are made of Bronze, an alloy of Copper and Tin. The castings are turned on a lathe, tuned and polished. The metal is not lacquered however, so ringers frequently wear gloves to protect the metal from the oils on the skin.

Handbells have five basic parts, 1.) the handle, 2.) the handguard, 3.) the tuned bronze casting, 4.) the yoke and restraining mechanism, 5.) the clapper.

Handbells are sold in sets. The chart below shows the ranges.



A three-octave set is recommended as a starting point. The following are the normally assigned positions in a handbell choir.

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|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| 1 = C4-D4 | 4 = B4-C5 | 7 = A5-B5 | 10 = G6-A6 |
| 2 = E4-F4 | 5 = D5-E5 | 8 = C6-D6 | 11 = B6-C7 |
| 3 = G4-A4 | 6 = F5-G5 | 9 = E6-F6 | |

Each position is responsible for the accidentals associated with the diatonic notes. For larger sets of handbells, treble octaves get assigned to the octave below (i.e. position 9 gets E7-F7 also). Bass notes are normally

covered by extra personnel. For a 4-octave set one person is added to cover G3 to B3. For a 5-octave two persons are normally added to cover the entire lower octave.

In addition to the bells themselves, beginning ensembles need tables, foam of 3 or 4-inch thickness and covers, usually of pinwale corduroy, handbell music binders, or music stands, gloves and possibly mallets for staccato playing.

Ringling techniques

For many ringers playing at the correct time is of utmost importance. For the director, and the critical listening ear, however, damping the bell when the duration is complete is just as important. Bells are normally damped at the shoulder, but also can be damped on the table.

Many special techniques are used in playing handbells. Most are articulations - Staccato is achieved by using mallets while the bells are on the table (♯), by thumb damping (TD), by using martellato (▼), or by plucking the bell while it is on the table (PL). Bells can also be shaken, swung and played with an echo effect. The possibilities are nearly endless. These are just the most commonly found techniques.

Using Handbell Creatively in Worship

- **Playing an anthem** – the most common use of handbells in worship to provide a voluntary, offertory, etc.
- **Playing a short introit** – some pieces are short for this purpose, some excerpts could be used.
- **Accompanying a choral anthem** – many choral anthems have augmenting handbell parts (e.g. *Seven Songs for the Church Year*, Michael Bedford, Choristers Guild, CGA693) or can be accompanied exclusively by handbells (*Creation Will Be At Peace*, Anna Laura Page, Alfred 12392 bells, 4248 SATB, 5898 SAB, 5899 2-pt)
- **Accompanying Psalmody** – for congregations who chant or use psalmody with responses, it is easy to find settings already prepared, play right out of the hymnal, or write out parts for yourself after attaining permission.
- **Accompany hymns and service music** – if the handbell choir plays the offertory, have them accompany a Doxology that may follow. If they play the prelude, have them join in the first hymn. Have a service where the handbell choir accompanies all of the singing.
- **Handbell trees** – processional or for accompaniment. There are published works for handbell trees. It is easy to develop your own. The Hopson book is particularly useful in this area.
- **Ensemble or solo ringing** – use your most eager ringers to try some solo, duet, trio, or quartet literature. Talented ringers will enjoy the challenge of ringing more than just two diatonic notes.
- **Random Ringing** – this technique is very accessible. It can even involve folks who are not involved in a handbell group. Chimes or bells could be distributed among the congregation. Try this with *Of the Father's Love Begotten*.
- **Tolling** – this can be added on hymns such as *Of the Father's Love Begotten*, *What Wondrous Love*, or *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*

Music to consider

Easy to Ring Praise and Worship, Peggy Bettcher, Agape, 2220, 3-5 octaves, L1 and L2
Humbly I Adore You, Shawn Gingrich, Agape, 2345, 3-5 octaves with opt. 2 oct chimes. L1+
Infant Holy, Infant Lowly, Karen Buckwalter, Beckenhorst, HB 174, 3-5 octaves with piano, L2
Joyful, Joyful, Valerie Stephenson, Choristers Guild, CGB419, 3-5 octaves – malleted, L1+
Westminster Chimes, Douglas Wagner, Agape, 1490, 3 octave, L1+

Annotated Bibliography

Allured, Donald E. *Mastering Musicianship in Handbells*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press (code # 4591-52), 1992.

This is the most recent and most accurate compilation of Don Allured's wealth of knowledge of handbell information. It is thorough and an excellent source for teachers of handbells.

Handbell notation and difficulty level system. Dayton, OH.: American Guild of English Handbell Ringers, Revised 1999.

This notation manual explains every approved symbol that one would find in handbell music. It also defines the guild's difficulty level system.

Hopson, Hal H. *The Creative Use of Handbells in Worship*, The Creative Church Musician Series, Vol 1., Carol Stream, IL.: Hope Publishing Company (code #1956), 1997.

This is one book in a series of useful manuals. It describes itself as a "mini-course in Handbell arranging for specific use in Worship Service." It contains many examples of ways to enhance hymn accompaniments, including random ringing, ostinati, peals descants, etc. Permission is granted to the owner to copy parts for handbell choir.

Moklebust, Cathy. *Hymn Stanzas for Handbells*, Augsburg Fortress (code# 11-10722), 1996.

This collection includes 18 hymn settings from *The Lutheran Book of Worship* and *With One Voice* – one stanza in regular setting, and one with descant or fuller chordal arrangement for a final stanza. Many of these are level 3 in difficulty.

Tucker, Margaret R. *Harmonies for Hymns, Chordal Accompaniments for Ten Familiar Hymns*. Garland, TX.: Choristers Guild (code #CGB251), 2001.

This easy collection (level 1+) is useful for beginning choirs or for children and youth. As it describes itself it uses chordal accompaniments and the melody is written on a separate staff that a soloist, congregation or another solo instrument could follow. Parts for C and Bb instruments for both treble and bass clef are included. Sing along sheets are also included. Both parts can be copied for use with the collection. The collection includes the tunes: Hymn to Joy, Foundation, Dix, Bradbury, He Leadeth Me, Italian Hymn, Converse, Bethany, St. Elizabeth, & Jesus Loves Me.

_____. *Harmonies for Hymns, Set II, Chordal Accompaniments for Ten Familiar Hymns*. Garland, TX.: Choristers Guild (code #CGB445), 2006.

The second volume includes the tunes: Truro, Regent Square, Morning Star, Hamburg, Ellacombe, Redhead, St. Kevin, Trentham, Eucharistic Hymn, & Kremser