

These guidelines have been prepared to assist composers who might be unfamiliar with handbells. Get a copy of “Handbell Notation, Difficulty Level System, Solo and Ensemble Notation” published by the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers ([www.handbellmusicians.org](http://www.handbellmusicians.org)) and follow its guidelines on notation standards and techniques. The instructions below are for music that includes up to 5 octaves of handbells and handchimes.

**Bass Bells** - C3 to B3 (2 ringers)

Bass bells are heavy. They take more time to move and are slower to ‘speak’ than the higher bells. Therefore, quarter notes at 96 bpm should be considered VERY fast for this range (unless played with mallets). By alternating the scale pattern, two people can cover this part of the handbell range in most circumstances; however, other players may be added depending on the demands of the music. It is not the composer’s task to designate who plays which pitches; the players will decide how the bells will be arranged on the table and who will play which notes.

**The Battery** - C4 to B5 (7 ringers)

The mid-range of the choir is usually played with each ringer holding one bell at a time in each hand.

**Treble Bells** - C6 to C8 (4 ringers)

The small treble bells can be played with two bells in each hand making it possible for four ringers to cover two octaves of pitches. Using various techniques, skillful ringers can hold two bells in each hand and sound one bell at a time or both together. Most often the bells in the top octave (D7 to C8) are doubled with the same pitches an octave lower. However, other bell assignments may also be used depending on the demands of the music (see chromatics below). Generally speaking, think of the upper two octaves as doubled or with only one of the two octaves sounding at a time. Contrapuntal writing across the two octaves or using different articulations, dynamics, or ringing techniques for each of the two octaves would most likely require a reassignment of the bells.

**Handchimes**

Compared to the rich overtones of handbells, the tone of handchimes is purer and softer in dynamics and has a longer decay time. Because their timbre is so distinct, handchimes provide a soothing contrast to the brilliance of the handbells. The two sets of instruments may be played simultaneously for a fuller sound. The lowest chimes (C2 to G3, often mounted on a rack and played with mallets) require several seconds for the sound to mature enough to be heard. They should not be assigned fast moving passages or notes of short duration. The treble handchimes (C6-C8) can be played 4-in-hand (two pitches in each hand), though not as quickly as handbells.

Composing for handbells comes with a set of challenges unlike that which occurs for any other musical ensemble. Although all of the ringers read from a complete score, each person plays only two notes in scalar succession and their accidentals. Generally speaking, they are assigned notes with the space note as the lower of their pitches, most often played with their left hand and the higher note on the adjacent line played with their right hand. The sheet music looks similar to a piano score; however, middle C (and the C# above middle C) and all notes below are written in the bass clef, and the Db above middle C and higher are written in treble clef. Handbells are a transposing instrument; they sound one octave higher than notated.

Composing for this many-handed, multi-brained musical instrument requires heightened sensitivity for how the music will be executed. Creating melodic contour at fast tempos is challenging. Beyond the courage, mental acuity, and physical dexterity needed to insert individual notes into a running passage that sweeps across the tables, achieving uniform dynamics throughout the line, or creating dynamic nuances requires considerable skill and practice. No ‘one’ ever plays a line; the tune is always shared. Furthermore, the function of each pitch can change in a heartbeat. What was melodic in one moment -

with its own code of dynamics, articulation, and damping - could in the next instant serve a harmonic function with a wholly different mode of playing. In both cases, ensemble awareness is critical, while trusting one's colleagues to play their notes precisely at the right time so that the momentum for each player's swing can be predicted. It's as if the tempo itself is a giant hacky sack being passed from player to player in various directions all at the same time, or a group of friends engaging in an elaborate 3-legged race with 13 people galloping down the hill.

Decoding the puzzle of the music, strategically assigning parts, figuring out the most efficient patterns for playing all the notes, and putting in the drill and repetitions for the ringers to move in tandem are all inherent conditions in the culture of handbell choirs. A significant source of joy in playing handbells is 'working out' these elements and mastering their execution. Even so, there are things that composers can do and avoid doing to help the ringers be optimally successful.

### **THINGS TO KNOW** about handbell ensembles

#### **Sharing Bells**

Rigid application of conventional handbell technique would have C#5 and Db5 (the same bell) played by different people. Players are accustomed to sharing bells by placing them on the table and picking them up as needed, and exceptions are commonplace.

#### **Chromatics**

- Bass: It takes a lot of table space to accommodate the bass bells in half-step intervals; it better be worth it!
- Battery: Playing chromatic passages in the mid-range involves putting down and picking up bells and using the table to damp the bells. Sometimes it involves a technique called 'weaving' - playing a succession of bells by changing which bell is in each hand. Quarter notes at 120 bpm should be considered fast for this technique.
- Treble: As noted, the treble bells can play four-in-hand, and though this technique is most commonly used for doubling the highest octave, it can also be used to play four distinct pitches such as Eb6/E6, F6/F#6. It's possible for virtuosic ringers to play these pitches very quickly (sixteenth notes at a quarter = 90); however, slower tempos will produce more reliable results.

#### **Voicing**

Close-position chords sound full and robust in bells. Open position, by comparison, sound thin. Stacked, diatonic clusters also work well. However, the rich overtones of the bells in combination with their high range cause some jazz chords or romantic harmonic writing to sound more dissonant than when heard on the piano or in other instrumental ensembles.

#### **Dynamics**

Compared to many instruments, handbells are fairly quiet at a distance. Despite this limit in overall volume, their dynamic range can be used to great effect when meticulously marked in the score. An effective approach to creating dynamic contrast is to write thick textures for more volume and thinner textures to sound softer. The higher bells can penetrate the sound palette at any volume, so giving them a rest in order to feature the lower bells can provide the ear a brief respite.

#### **Articulations / Ringing Techniques**

Make use of common handbell techniques to build in variety and to hold the listener's attention: such as thumb damps, ring touches, tower swings, martellato techniques (striking the handbell horizontally on a padded table), mallet techniques, shakes, and echoes to name a few.

#### **Page Layout**

Use a large print. In many cases the music will be read from as far as three feet away. Number every measure. Be attentive to page turns, forcing them early if necessary in order to end the page with a sustained chord that will allow the ringers time to free one of their hands for turning. Always provide a bells used chart and a chimes used chart.