

Handbells in Contemporary Worship

by Ron Mallory



a resource for members of
Handbell Musicians
OF AMERICA

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Making the Case for Including Handbells in Contemporary Worship

More and more churches are moving to contemporary worship styles in an effort to reach out to an increasingly secular culture. But even if your church may have begun using a praise band to lead some or all of its worship music, this doesn't mean that your handbells have to go into permanent storage. As contemporary worship music continues to mature, more and more praise bands are finding creative ways to incorporate string, woodwind, and brass instruments into their ensembles, and there's no reason this list can't include handbells.

While many fine arrangements of contemporary worship songs are available for a handbell choir to perform on their own, it's also possible for one or more handbell players to be integrated into a praise band. The resources presented here are intended to show some examples of how a handbell soloist, ensemble, or choir can work alongside an existing praise band to supplement and enrich your church's contemporary worship music. Since the concept of using handbells in contemporary worship may be foreign to your pastor or worship leader, each of the video tutorials in this resource ends with a "music video" showing a praise band performing together with a handbell soloist, ensemble, or choir. Use these videos to help make your case for using handbell musicians to help lead contemporary worship.

There are several good reasons to include "classical" instruments such as handbells in a church praise band. First, contemporary Christian music is often intended to echo the sound of contemporary secular music, where use of these instruments has always been common. From the Beatles' use of a string ensemble to accompany "Eleanor Rigby" in 1966, to Coldplay's use of an orchestra on their 2008 song "Viva La Vida," recent artists from Dave Matthews Band to Sara Bareilles



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to OneRepublic and many more have taken advantage of the textural varieties possible by using instruments outside the usual guitar-bass-drums-keyboard spectrum of the traditional rock band. The alternative band OK Go has even been known to incorporate handbells into their live shows, several examples of which may be found on YouTube.

Secondly, part of our job as music leaders within the church is to be good stewards of the musical resources within our congregation. If we have a fantastic cellist, oboe player, or team of handbell musicians in our congregation, it should be our goal as leaders to find a way for them to use their gifts to the glory of God, regardless of worship style.

Finally, it is important for our instrument to continue to evolve outside the bounds of the obvious. Handbell groups like Sonos, Campanile, and others have already stretched the bounds of what handbell music can be. But one of the greatest unexplored territories of handbell music lies in our inclusion into other kinds of musical ensembles. Handbell ringers so often perform only with other handbell ringers, but if we are wanting to be taken seriously by other musicians, I believe we must learn how to meaningfully incorporate handbell choirs, ensembles, and soloists into orchestras, chamber groups, and even jazz and rock bands.

Ask your pastor or worship leader if he or she would be open to experimenting with adding handbells to a contemporary song or two. Play them some examples of contemporary bands using classical instruments, and show the music videos which are part of this resource to help make the case for including handbells in a contemporary worship setting. Use the sheet music provided here, and use the principles in the tutorials to write some more of your own. Once you've explored the possibilities within your own church, share your ideas with other contemporary congregations in your community which may just have an old set of handbells sitting in a closet somewhere.

While the move towards contemporary worship can sometimes feel frustrating to those of us with a more "traditional" music background, it's important to remember that our church's music style must always

be subordinate to the mission of our congregation and the vision of our pastors and other church leaders. But there's no reason we as handbell musicians can't offer our abilities to the glory of God in a contemporary worship setting, and in doing so enrich the fabric of the worship experience for everyone. Talk to your pastor or worship leader about using handbells in contemporary worship (after all, chances are they won't think to ask you first!).

Getting Permission to Arrange Handbell Parts for Copyrighted Praise Songs

Most contemporary praise songs, and even many traditional hymns written since the early twentieth century, are under copyright. This means they cannot be legally performed or recorded without paying a royalty fee to the copyright owner. It also means you cannot legally write your own arrangement of these songs without obtaining permission from the copyright owner, even if this arrangement is just for use within your own church.

Fortunately, there are a number of convenient methods for obtaining this permission. The one most churches pursue is the Church Copyright License offered through Contemporary Christian Licensing, International (CCLI). For an annual fee, which varies depending on the size of your congregation (for example, the yearly cost is \$245 for a congregation of 200-499, as of summer 2012), you receive legal permission to use most contemporary songs in your worship services, as well as permission to write custom arrangements for your own ensembles if no suitable commercial arrangement is available. More information about CCLI is available at ccli.com. Other companies which offer blanket copyright licenses for churches include LicenSing (licensingonline.org) and OneLicense.net. Each license varies a bit in exactly what it covers, so be sure to read the fine print.

If you do not have a CCLI or similar license, you must contact the copyright holder directly to request permission to arrange a handbell part for a copyrighted praise song or hymn. The name of the copyright holder is typically listed on the sheet music, lead sheet, or chord chart for a particular song, and can also be found using the Song Search tool at CCLI's website (you do not need a CCLI license to use this search engine). Many companies, such as EMI Christian Music Group (emc-mglicensing.com), have a link on their website where you can obtain permission to write your own arrangement of a copyrighted song for a small fee, typically \$10-\$25.

As church musicians, we have the responsibility to set a good example for our musicians, congregations, and community by complying with copyright laws.



For more information you may contact the author, Ron Mallory, at ronmallory@earthlink.net



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