

Handbell Composing and Arranging for Beginners

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Before you even think about thinking about thinking about beginning:

Music theory – if you don't know much, take it upon yourself to learn.

(<https://www.musictheory.net/lessons>)

Basics of handbell anatomy, physiology, and use.

Attend handbell classes, talk to handbell ringers, etc.

Styles of idiomatic music for handbells

Listen to a LOT of bell music to find pieces you like

WHAT do you like about those pieces?

How does the composer do that thing you like?

Before you even think about thinking about beginning:

Why do you want to write?

Who are you writing for?

Before you even think about beginning:

How will you get your ideas down?

Manuscript paper

Notation software (Finale, Sibelius, MuseScore, and many others)

Work with the software to learn it as well as you can

Take classes/lessons from users of that program to learn better

Audio recording

You can sing/hum/dictate your ideas verbally, but you WILL need to notate them at some point

What will you write?

Original piece? Arrangement?

What level?

What style?

If an arrangement, which piece?

Pick a piece your target ensemble will enjoy ringing

Pick a piece YOU will enjoy arranging

Consider the tune vs. your intended level

e.g. A lot of chromatics in a tune don't work well with level 1

Is it in the Public Domain? (Currently anything copyright 1925 or before, plus other rare cases)

If not PD, you need to get permission – whole other class, way too much to go into here.

Before you begin:

Decide on:

Number of octaves (how many octaves do you have?)

Key signature

Consider range of the melody

Consider range of the accompaniment

Time Signature

Intended HMA level

<https://handbellmusicians.org/music-resources/agehr-music-2/notation-guide/>

BEGIN!

If you're writing for a range of bells (2-3 oct., 3-5 oct., etc.), you're usually better off to write for the smaller ensemble first, then add on octaves once the piece is solid.

**You can write the sections below in any order, and in fact, you'll frequently go back and forth from one to the other as the piece develops. *Composing is NOT linear, start-to-finish. Sorry.*

Introduction — write something that grabs their attention right off the bat! If it bores you, it will certainly bore your listener!

Writing Meaningful Melodies:

Arrangements — your melody is already spelled out for you, but feel free to take some liberties in terms of meter, rhythm, and pitch. (You'll frequently do this due to range constraints)

Original tunes — Is your melody memorable? Can you whistle it? Even more important, can you *stop* whistling it? If you can't get it stuck in your head, it won't get stuck in your listener's head.

Writing Attractive Accompaniments:

Style:

Arpeggios (ascending, descending, Alberti-esque, or something even more creative)

Block chords (root position vs. inversion; rung, mart-lift, mallet, etc.)

A combination?

Harmony:

“Traditional” — I, IV, V. In an arrangement, this would mean you follow the original harmony exactly.

“Modern”— limitless possibilities. Changing the expected harmony; minor vs. major; “blue” notes.

Chords in treble, bass, battery, or multiple locations?

Restating Sections Without Sounding Redundant:

Copy and Paste are Your Best Friend (and Worst Enemy)

Things to add or remove:

Octaves, harmony notes, instruments, countermelody

Tying It All Together:

Catchy and effective transitions between sections.

Use material from elsewhere in the piece to give a sense of continuity and flow.

All Good Things Must Come to an End:

Find a way to end the piece that leaves the listener satisfied, and just a little sad it's over.

Find a way to end the piece that leaves the listener breathless.

Don't find a way to end the piece that leaves the listener asking, “That's it?”