Ringing The Psalms

By Michael Helman

The Book of Psalms is the hymnal of the Bible. Expressing a wide range of emotions, needs, and feelings of the People of God, the psalms have been at the heart of the Judeo-Christian worship. There has been renewed interest in making the psalms central in prayer, singing and worship. In Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopal traditions, the psalms are used on a weekly basis as a response to Gods word. The Common Lectionary which is used by many faith traditions includes a psalm for each Sunday of the Church year. Despite the agreement by all faiths that the psalms are a vital part of worship, the performance practice of the psalms varies from congregation to congregation.

Most congregations employ a traditional call and response type of performance in praying the psalms. This usually includes having the congregation sing a response which is either derived from the psalm itself or reflects the over-all mood of the psalm. The United Methodist Hymnal, for instance, often uses phrases from well known hymns as the response to a psalm. The verses are either chanted by a soloist (cantor) or choir or may be read responsively by the congregation and the worship leader. Since the psalms, by their very nature, are meant to be sung, this second method is less effective, but is still often used. Most hymnals include chant tunes and marks for pointing the psalms so they can be easily chanted by the congregation. Of course, there are the many metrical psalm settings which are in all our hymnals.

In addition to what is in most hymnals, there are a number of different psalm settings which have been composed in the past 20 years. Some of these would include the Respond and Acclaim series published by Oregon Catholic Press, Psalms for the Church Year (multiple volumes) published by GIA, as well as individual compositions for choir and congregation published by GIA, Augsburg Fortress, Concordia, and others.

With all this said, how can we use handbells to effectively express the moods and emotions of the psalms no matter how your congregation may choose to pray them? In the next few paragraphs, we will look are the various ways the psalms can be presented and how we can incorporate bells to make them more interesting and worshipful.

If you incorporate various chant melodies in presenting the psalms, it is very easy to add handbells to enhance the experience. Since most chant melodies are simple or based on one of the modes, it is easy to create a cluster chord as an accompaniment. Analyze the modal melody and build your cluster chord based on the major melodic notes in the chant melody. The cluster chord can be played at the beginning of each phrase of the psalm.

If the psalm is a joyful psalm such as Psalm 98 or Psalm 150, your may wish to reflect this mood by randomly ringing the cluster chord throughout the chanting of the psalm. If the psalm is of a penitential nature, such as Psalm 51, you may Ringing The Psalms By Michael Helman wish to keep the chord very open and sparse, perhaps an open fifth or a fifth with an added second, to again reflect the more somber mood of the text. The use of bells to accompany chant is very beautiful and effective.

There are resources which use more updated chant melodies with sung responses. As an example of this type of resource, I will highlight the Respond and Acclaim series published by Oregon Catholic Press. A psalm is assigned for each Sunday of the liturgical year based on the three year lectionary and incorporates an easy response which is sung by the congregation and chant melodies which are not based on plainchant. It is very easy to take the responses and have them played on handbells. You may wish to double the melody or bass lines for a fuller sound. Bells can then play chords to accompany the choir or soloist for the verses. This will take a little more rehearsal so that the change in the chords will coordinate with the soloist. Chanting should follow the stress of the text, not be forced into a strict rhythm. This means that the phrases are fluid and each phrase may be different depending on how many words go with each note of the chant. The bells need to be sensitive to this and work with a choir or soloist to make this sound seamless, fluid and effortless. Because the chant melodies in this series are more harmonically based than in plain chant, random ringing or cluster chords do not work as well.

GIA also has many resources for the singing of the psalms which incorporate handbells. In fact, they have published a handbell accompaniment book to their very popular series Psalms for the Church Year. If you are unfamiliar with this series, the psalms are presented with a refrain sung by the congregation with newly composed melodies for the verses. In most of these psalms, the text is a paraphrase of the more traditional translations of the psalms and the melodies and accompaniments are in a more contemporary idiom. GIA also has many individual octavos of the psalms which often include suggestions for other instruments including handbells.

The tradition in many congregations is to read the psalms responsively. Handbells can still be included to help create a mood which reflects the theme of the psalm. For more joyful psalms, create a festive mood by random ringing a major chord with an added second or sixth, or repeat a bell peal or scale pattern while the psalm is read.

INSERT EXAMPLE

You can position three or four ringers at various locations in your worship space to surround the congregation in sound. If you use a psalm as a call to worship, ringers may be walking slowly down the aisles of the church and assembling in the front to continue ringing as the first hymn is sung. You may also wish to ring the scale or peal a few times at the beginning and the end of the psalm to help frame to reading of the psalm. The peal could also be used one or twice during the psalm rather than a sung response to help punctuate or emphasize the form of the psalm. For more penitential psalms, you may wish to create a ringing pattern which is in a minor mode or includes some dissonance.

Insert example

For reading the psalm on Good Friday or Ash Wednesday, you may wish to toll a single bell or an open fifth to create a more somber mood. If parts of a psalm are used as a preparation for prayer or time of confession, you may wish to incorporate chimes rather than bells to create more mellow sound. Continue the ringing pattern throughout the prayer time or time of reflection to help create a prayerful mood. If you wish to add a response that is a phrase form a hymn, you can ring chords as an accompaniment to the singing and then random ring during the reading of the psalm.

Insert example

Many ideas for peals or ostinato patterns can be found in The Creative Use of Handbells in Worship by Hal H. Hopson which is a very comprehensive volume for suggesting uses of bells during your worship service.

Congregations of all denominations have begun using the music of Taize during their worship time or as the basis for special prayer services during various seasons of the year. Much of this music is based on phrases from the psalms. Again, it is very easy to add handbells or chimes to this music to enhance the prayerful mood of these pieces. The bells play the simple chord patterns which are suggested for the keyboard accompaniment. These can be expanded to add more bass or treble notes for fuller chords. Because of the simple nature of the Taize music, use the bells sparingly with other instruments to add variety in accompanying these pieces.

The use of handbells with the psalms can greatly enhance any worship experience, but here are a few things to keep in mind. I would caution you that all musicians involved need to be well rehearsed so the worship experience is prayerful and doesn’t distract the congregation. Sometimes having the bell ringers off to the side or in a balcony rather than in the front of the sanctuary is less distracting. Do not overuse the handbells in any one worship service; sometimes using the bells to embellish the psalm and a verse of a hymn will be enough. Since the congregation and choir may be singing with the bells, you will want to be sure the bells are on the hardest setting and let the ringers play out when necessary.

These are just a few ideas of what you can do to enhance the praying of the psalms by your congregation. Let yourself be creative and dont be afraid to try something new. By using some of these techniques, the psalms can truly be musical experiences for your congregation. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Selected Resources Handbells in Worship by Hal Hopson, Hope Publishing, No. 1956 Handbells in Catholic Worship Jeffery Honore, Hope Publishing, No. 2120 Handbells in Liturgical Worship Schaulk, Concordia Publishing, 99-1254 Tintinnabulum, The Liturgical Use of Handbells Proulx, GIA Publications, G-4569 Psalms for the Church Year, volume 1 (Handbell edition) Marty Haugen and David Haas, arranged for handbells by