

Bach, Beethoven, and . . . Susan T. Nelson

by Cindy Alexander

Five Favorites by Susan Nelson

Heaven's Rest (Hope)

Three to six octaves with optional chimes and sopranino recorder (C instrument). Has a "Southern Harmony" sound with unusual accompaniment.

How Firm a Foundation/Simple Gifts Medley (Hope)

Three to seven octaves with optional three to four octaves chimes, bell tree, and "alternate" bells (two to three octaves P&F or SMB). A glock part is provided for three- to four-octave choirs, which duplicates the upper fifth octave bell tree, and the tubular bell (or organ chimes) part can substitute for the alternate bells if they are not available. Orchestral/multitextural arrangement that interweaves both tunes.

Indonesian Impressions (High Meadow)

Five octaves. Imitates the sound of a Javanese gamelan. Uses varied techniques along with a new stopped technique.

Mediaevale (Laurendale)

Commissioned by Laurie & Rusty Sanders for RingOut! Ensemble (performance notes/suggestions were written by them). Double quartet using only three octaves (or four, has Bb3) of bells with no overlap in notes from one group to another. Optional piccolo (C instrument) and percussion.

Coronation Fanfare (All Hail the Power) (Concordia)

Three to six octaves/organ/two trumpets with optional timpani and congregation. A "piece within a piece" – the fanfare, interludes and ending can stand alone as an original composition.

Susan T. Nelson goes where no one has gone before.

Who else writes handbell music that imitates a Javanese gamelan? Or one that puts a Brubeck spin on "Jesus Loves Me"? Here's one that includes a steel pan part, another one for soprano sax, and one with a recorder quartet. How 'bout a Klezmer interpretation of a tune popular in neighborhood synagogues? Call on Sue, as the RingOut! Ensemble did, if you want a piece for two handbell quartets plus piccolo and percussion.



Susan T. Nelson

"I like the unusual," Sue admits.

She's also practical. "I include optional instruments whenever possible, as I think it helps groups stretch their budget and their library," Sue explained. "But I only have two that actually need the extra instruments. Normally, the handbell parts in my pieces are completely independent, and the optional instruments are not required for performance."

Sometimes, neither is the whole song. *Coronation Fanfare*, among others, forms a "piece within a piece" – the fanfare, interludes, and ending can stand alone as an original composition, leaving out the hymn tune that it's based on.

Although Sue also writes for other instruments, she particularly enjoys writing for handbells. "Bells lend themselves to so many different types of music," she said. "And maybe because it's a relatively new instrument, we always seem to find, if there's a limitation, a way to get around it. It's like a bunch of musicians just having fun with a new toy."

Bells allow Sue to express her many musical interests, which range from early music to ethnomusicology and jazz. Sue played in a gamelan for three years while in college at Rutgers New Brunswick. The Javanese instrument uses tuned gongs, xylophones, and drums "in an ensemble setting that's a lot like handbells," Sue explained. "You have to be so attuned to what the other instruments are doing." Gamelan is passed on as an oral tradition, and there's no director or written music. "Everyone plays in

patterns, and the drummer has certain patterns that cue what's going to happen next," Sue explained. "Handbells give me a socially acceptable outlet for my Javanese tendencies."

Hence, her *Indonesian Impressions*, a piece that may not find a home in every handbell program. "I like it because it's just so different," Sue said. "Sometimes these things just happen, and you have to write it down so it doesn't keep invading your space."

It seems perfectly consistent that a woman who owns her own krumhorn ("You paid money for that?" her sister asked incredulously) would also enjoy writing for Petit & Fritsens, the clangorously tuned old Dutch bells. Sue's pairing of "How Firm a Foundation" and "Simple Gifts" includes a part for either Petit & Fritsens or Silver Melody Bells (optional, of course), and she's recently completed a commission for the Ringers of Bryn Mawr to play on four octaves of PFs.

"It's like a disease with the Petit & Fritsens," she said. "Ever since I got exposed to them, that sound's not going away. It's a sound that the handbell world doesn't use very often – it's a new, old instrument – so it presents all kinds of options."

Writing a piece using only the Dutch bells was "a puzzle," she said. "You have to be so careful of the clusters and the chords because of the way they're tuned. But it was a lot of fun and a good growth experience – and it's good to get those old bells out of the closet."

As a self-supporting musician, Sue plays organ, directs the vocal choir, and leads a five-octave, intergenerational handbell choir at St. Mark Lutheran in Hamilton, New Jersey. She also subs as an organist at four synagogues, where the Friday and Saturday schedule works well with her regular church job. "*Osse Shalom* is a tune that's used quite a bit in Reform synagogues, and they all do it differently – some lively, some somber, and some in between," Sue said. Her arrangement of the song by Israeli composer Nurit Hirsch

samples some of each, but the ongoing Klezmer clarinet and tambourine keep the energy spinning.

Sue also works three days a week in the media library at Westminster Choir College. "It's a great job for a composer," she said. "You almost can get a free education." In fact, she got her start in handbells at Westminster. "The church I was working at in 1989 celebrated its 100th anniversary and wanted to buy something of significance that people could look at in another hundred years and say, 'That's what they did for their centennial,'" Sue related. "Handbells seemed to fit the bill, and they asked if I would direct their new bell choir. As training, they sent me to three weekend seminars at Westminster."

Kathy Ebling-Thorne taught the first seminar. "She was just great; she covered everything a beginner needed to know, right down to how many tables and pads you would need." The next two seminars were led by legendary Japanese conductor Katsumi Kodama, shortly before his untimely death. "He had wonderful ideas about how to get a uniform sound, for instance," Sue said. That's one way to get your feet wet!

With her flair for the breaking edge and her evident respect for other cultures, it's no surprise that Sue Nelson is a Star Trek fan. She picks Jean-Luc Picard as the best of the captains.

"I admire his ethics, his elegance, the regard he had for all life forms," said Sue in an unconscious description of her own strengths and values. "He was a strong presence, a protector, and had such strong curiosity. And after all, he was a musician – he had that flute, which was really a glorified penny whistle."

Perhaps Jean-Luc would like to take a turn on *Heaven's Rest*, a penny whistle natural if ever there was one. It's optional, though – and you can substitute a sopranino recorder if you can't find a Ressikan flute player in your neighborhood. ♪

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