

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMPOSING, ARRANGING, AND TRANSCRIBING?

by Kevin McChesney

Composing means creating music that is original and not based on a pre-existing tune or idea.

Examples of compositions for handbells are Dobrinski's "Rondo Passacaglia", Sherman's "Grazioso", and McChesney's "Make Me An Instrument of Thy Peace".

Arranging refers to taking an existing tune like a carol or a hymn tune and setting it in a fresh way. I find that arranging is every bit as creative an endeavor as composing and that originality has just as large a role in arrangements as original compositions. When arranging a pre-existing tune, the goal is to have something fresh and original to say about that tune, to show it in a new light and expand the dimensions of its message.

Examples of arrangements are Keller's "Hymn to Joy", Moglebust's "Meditation on Beautiful Savior", and McChesney's "Now the Green Blade Riseth".

Transcribing is a term that refers to taking existing musical material written for one instrument or set of instruments and making it playable and communicate well when played on another instrument or set of instruments. In transcribing, there is no original material added as in arranging, and what appears in the transcription is as true to the source as possible.

Examples of transcriptions are handbell settings of Rossini's "Overture to the Barber of Seville", Handel's "The Rejoicing from The Fireworks Music", and Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring".

There are a number of transcriptions that are mistakenly referred to as arrangements (though in my experience it is uncommon to see arrangements referred to as transcriptions). When the setting is close to the source material with as few changes as possible (made only so that music originally for, say, band or orchestra will be playable and speak well on handbells), with no additions of original material, that is a transcription. When the piece is based on existing material but contains music created by the writer, such as interludes between stanzas, reharmonizations, descants, and so on, that piece is an arrangement.