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## Plans and Suggestions for Teaching Handbells

# "So Long Ago On Christmas Day" CGA-594

by C. Michael Hawn

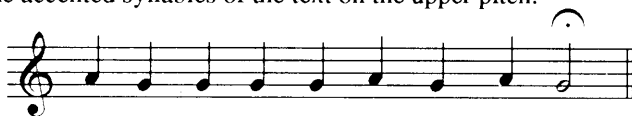
This anthem tells the Christmas story, with a refrain focusing on the angels' song from Luke 2:14, *Gloria in excelsis Deo* ("Glory to God in the highest"). Children as young as grade one can sing the simple, lyrical tune well, while the third stanza canon offers a challenge for choirs with a concentration of children grades three through six. An easy handbell part affords a festive option.

### Vocal Development

The familiar song of the angels, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, is an ideal textual and musical fragment for singing. Begin by speaking the text in a light, free voice. Emphasize the appropriate accent when speaking:

Glo'-ri-a in ex-cel'-sis De'-o (glaw'-ree-ah een ehk'-shehl'-sees deh'-aw).

Chant the refrain lightly on a two-note melody, singing the accented syllables of the text on the upper pitch:



Glo - ri - a in - ex - cel - sis De - o.

Sing slowly, emphasizing a legato sound with clear, sustained vowels and crisp consonants. Strive for a perfect unison with plenty of energy provided by good breath support and ample breath flow. Listen for the vowel sounds in the Latin text and shape each vowel with your hands. Encourage the choristers to shape their mouths in the same way you are shaping the vowels with your hands.

Next, sing the melody of the refrain on the syllable "loo" as indicated below:



loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo

Have the choristers echo you. Take a moment to gather the singers on the starting pitch before singing the entire refrain. Be careful not to sing with the children. Sing the exercise a half-step higher until it begins on g4.

Finally, add the text to the refrain and treat it as a vocalise just as you did in the second example.

### A Lesson Plan

**Week One.** Introduce the vocalises from the above examples. Then, except for the refrain, sing the anthem as a solo as the children follow the score. Invite them to join you each time the refrain appears. Avoid using the piano during this phase of teaching. Secure the starting pitch from the piano, sing the verses of the anthem unaccompanied, and with an appropriate conducting gesture, motion the children to sing. This will develop both the children's ability to follow the conductor and their sense of tonality and vocal independence.

After singing through the anthem as described above, sing each phrase of stanza one separately, allowing the children to echo after each phrase.

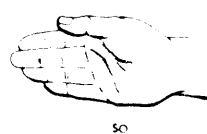
**Week Two.** Briefly review the vocalises provided above. If the children have developed an appropriate posture for singing and use good breath, they should gradually develop a clearer unison. Take time to secure all singers on the starting pitch of the vocalise.

Each stanza begins with a melodic pattern that can be shown on pitch syllables:

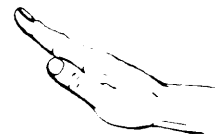


So Mi Re Do So Mi Re Do

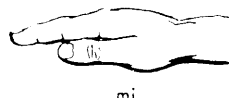
To strengthen the singing of the opening phrase of each stanza and increase the vocal independence of the singers, sing this phrase with pitch syllables and sign it with hand signals:



so



re



mi



do

Answers to crossword puzzle- **ACROSS:** 1. EXCELSIS 2. LUKE 3. CHRISTMAS 4. DOVE 5. HANDBELLS 6. HOPSON **DOWN:** 1. DE 2. GLORIA 3. CANON 4. SHEPHERD 5. ADVENT

Invite the children to sing and sign the opening phrase of each stanza and sing the refrain at the conclusion. The leader should sing the remaining phrases as a solo. Attempt this unaccompanied.

Finally, review stanza one and introduce stanza four.

**Week Three.** Review the vocalise for the refrain as well as sing and sign the opening motif.

Speak the text of stanza three, one phrase at a time, allowing the children to echo each phrase. Provide the starting pitch, and determine if the children can sing stanza three unaccompanied.

Review stanzas one, three, and four with light piano accompaniment. Stanza one may already be memorized.

Tell the choir that on the following week some time will be devoted to listening to those who want to sing stanza two as a solo or to sing in a small ensemble.

**Week Four.** Warm-up with the vocalise. Practice singing and signing the opening phrase beginning on different pitch levels.

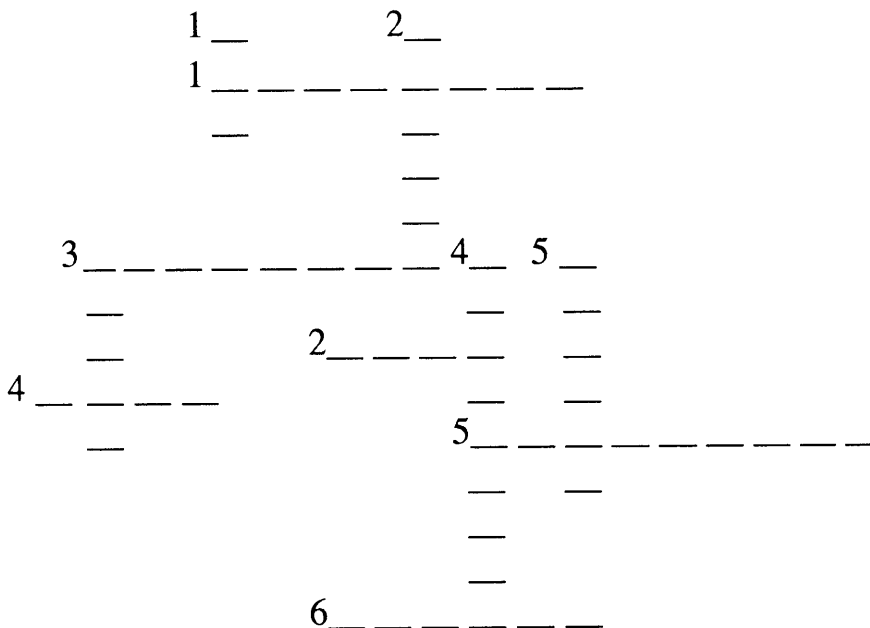
Sing stanza three unaccompanied. If the children can sing it securely without the piano, they may be ready to try it in canon. If you have several confident singers in grades four through six, divide them equally along with the remaining choir members and practice singing stanza three in canon. As confidence increases, you may be able to sing the canon with boys on the first entrance and girls on the second. This can give each part a more distinctive sound.

Audition singers for stanza two. Choose one singer or a small ensemble to sing the stanza. Sing the entire anthem with light piano accompaniment.

**Later Weeks.** Secure a more confident sound by rehearsing each stanza unaccompanied. Ask the children's opinion on matters of interpretation. Which stanzas might be sung more softly or more loudly? Should any stanzas be more *legato* or more *marcato*? The handbell part should be learned independently and added after the anthem can be sung with accuracy and confidence.

## Chorister's Page

### "So Long Ago on Christmas Day" Crossword Puzzle



#### ACROSS:

1. The Latin word for highest
2. The book of the Bible with the song of the angels
3. The day we celebrate the birth of Jesus
4. The bird that rhymes with "above" in stanza three
5. You will need three of these to accompany this anthem
6. The last name of the composer

#### DOWN:

1. The name for God in Latin
2. The word for "Glory" in Latin
3. The musical form of stanza three
4. The first people to arrive at the manger
5. The season before Christmas

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