On the history and use of descants in congregational hymn singing

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The practice of singing descants with congregational hymns is fairly common in churches where there are choirs. It adds color and excitement to the vocal line in a way organs alone cannot. In the case of a processional or recessional hymn sung by full congregation, the addition of a descant gives the entire service a sense of grandeur and drama.

This brief article will describe the origins of descant singing in England during the early twentieth century. The author intends it to be a practical source for those interested in using descants with their choirs, rather than a scholarly study on the topic. The introduction to the origins of contemporary descant usage will be followed by a look at the inclusion of descants in some denominational hymnals. Finally, practical comments on using and composing descants and a set of ten examples by author that were composed for use at the Rikkyo University All Saints Chapel will conclude the article. It is hoped that this modest study will encourage increasing use of descants during services and ceremonies of the Christian church in Japan.

That the use of descants is common can be seen by a glance at hymnals of overseas mainline Protestant denominations in English-speaking areas. The “Hymnal 1982” of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States, for example, contains seven-hundred twenty hymns; thirty of these are paired with descants. Yet, the predecessor of that hymnal, the “Hymnal 1940” has none. Is it possible that the practice of adding descants to hymns is a recent one? Surprisingly, not much has been written concerning the history of descants. The “New Grove Dictionary” has the entry “Discant,” but describes a different type of musical elaboration common until the sixteenth-century. The “Grove Concise Dictionary of Music” gives us a terse, but usable, definition of descants: “..it (descant) is also used to refer to a high, florid part added above the melody of a hymn.”\(^1\) Of course, not all descants are florid. But at

least we have a working definition – an added part that lies above the melody of a
hymn.

An early publication of descants in the form prevalent today is Geoffrey Shaw's
"The Descant Hymn-Tune Book," (1925).² Shaw (1879-1943) was an English
composer of music for the Anglican Church, as well as a church organist. The preface
of his collection of descants was authored by one 'HB,' rather than Shaw, but contains
much valuable information about the use and origins of descants at the time. The
preface states:

“Recent years have seen in Church music a widespread revival of methods and
material from the past – in some cases from a remote past...Happily, one of the most
popular and simplest revivals, “Descant,” is of a type that can be undertaken
successfully in any church where a few capable trebles are available.”³

Further along, the preface describes the difference between descants and an
earlier, similar practice called “faux-bourdon.” This type of descant, it says, was the
natural result of arranging hymns with the melody in the tenor voice. Putting the hymn
tune in the tenor part automatically transformed the highest vocal part (treble or
soprano) into a descant. This practice had its roots in the music of the Renaissance
period. However, placing a hymn melody in the upper-most voice, and then creating a
new melody above it would appear to have originated in the early twentieth-century,
even though Shaw states that it is a revival of earlier practice. One can state with some
confidence that the way in which descants are sung today originates roughly a century
before our own time. An example of Shaw's style of descant composition can be seen
in example 1 (see next page). Notice that the organ part has been written to support
the descant. The original melody of the hymn now lies in the alto part, and the harmony
of the original tune has been somewhat altered.

As well as the music of the descants themselves, the preface of the publication
explained how descants should be used. Here are some of the more important points:
1. descants exist to provide relief in long hymns; one should be careful not to overuse
   them
2. a hymn of four or five verses may have one descant, a hymn with six or seven
   might have two descants; no hymn should be give more than three or four descants
3. verses chosen for descants should have texts suitable for this type of elaboration

²Geoffrey Shaw, The Descant Hymn-Tune Book, Book I. (London: Novello and
Company, Limited, nd).
³Ibid., Preface.
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F. J. Haydn, 1732—1809

DESCANT

MELODY
4. in hymns with a refrain, a descant may be used every verse on the refrain, while the entirety of the descant could be used for the last verse
5. occasionally, when a strong body of choir singers and a large congregation is present, and the trebles of the choir are strong, a descant verse should be sung a cappella. This works particularly well in resonant buildings
6. it is generally best to give the descant to all the trebles of the choir. But when the choir is very large, part of the trebles may sing the hymn melody, while the others provide the descant
7. Any new feature in church music should be introduced with care, including descants. Congregations generally welcome the singing of them, but prior explanation and rehearsal may be needed.

One recent source for information on the history of descants is a two-part article by Clark Kimberling entitled “Hymn Tune Descants.” Kimberling’s research shows that the use of descants (in the modern sense) did, indeed, first appear in England in the early twentieth-century. Athelstan Riley’s “Concerning Hymn Tunes and Sequences” (London, 1915) contains a chapter entitled (paradoxically) “The French Ecclesiastical Melodies.” In this chapter both two and four-part faux bourdons are mentioned. Riley stated that the four-part type were French, and cites a “little-known book” as their source. Of more interest to us, however, is the fact that all but one of the two-part descants were likely written by Englishmen, suggesting that the descant in common practice today originated in England, rather than France. Geoffrey Shaw went on to publish a second set of hymn descants in 1934, by which time the practice of adding descants to congregational singing was “firmly established” both in England and in English-speaking countries overseas.

What was the catalyst for the tremendous boom in descant creation in the early twentieth-century? It is likely that the publication of “The English Hymnal” in 1906 helped create a need. According to its preface, this hymnal was to be "A collection of the best hymns in the English language." It was a ground-breaking publication for two reasons. First, it included music that the English church had not been in the habit of

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5Ibid., p. 20
6Ibid.
7Ibid., p. 23.
singing, including Plainsong hymns, German chorales, English folk tunes, along with the more familiar nineteenth-century hymns one could find in “Hymns Ancient and Modern” (1861). The editor of “The English Hymnal” was composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958). This fact assured that not only was the selection of music broad and inclusive, but that it was of the highest quality. “The English Hymnal” did not, however, include any descants. Kimberling believes that the publication of this excellent musical resource created the need for descants.\(^9\) In any case, it is probably not coincidental that within a few decades of its release descant collections began to appear. Both the above-mentioned Riley and Shaw composed descants to be sung with the contents of “The English Hymnal.” (as well as with that of “Hymns Ancient and Modern”)

Another important early descant collections from the period is Alan Gray's “A Book of Descants” (150 descants, 1926). Contemporaneous with the publication of collections of descants was the appearance of descants in hymnals. The 1925 edition of “Songs of Praise” was the first hymnal to include significant numbers of descants,\(^10\) many of which had appeared early in descant collections. The subsequent edition (1931) includes descants from Gray's collection, among others. By the 1930's, the practice of singing descants was firmly established in both churches and schools in England and overseas. Today many major hymnals include descants, and one can easily find collections of descants for purchase. The practice is generally accepted and appreciated in mainline churches.

What of the situation in Japan? The publications of the largest Protestant denomination, the 日本基督教団 (United Church of Christ in Japan), provides us with an insight into the apparent fluctuation of interest in the topic. Though the 1954 「讃美歌」 (“Sanbika” or Hymnal) included 548 hymns, no descants were provided. Just over a decade later, however, a supplement to the hymnal was published entitled 「讃美歌 第二編」 (“Sanbika” Part II) (1967). This collection of 259 hymns included 14 descants. (hymns Nos. 4, 29, 41, 42, 131, 216, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248). The preface to this supplement describes the use of descants as something new in Japan, and recommends their use. In a paragraph entitled デスカントとその使用について (The use of descants), the following comments are made.

\(^{9}\)Kimberling, p. 23
\(^{10}\)Ibid.
“In our country a new technique has appeared; that of using descants. Descants are decorative melodies that are placed above the soprano or melodic line of a hymn, and which give variety and a fullness to the sound. They may also be performed by instruments...descants give a brilliant effect, but must be used in moderation. They are recommended for use in ceremonies, special services, school events, Christmas and Easter, and other special gatherings.”

In 1976 a final addition was made to the  "讃美歌" ("Sanbika") with the inclusion of  「ともにうたおう」("Tomo ni Utau"). This collection of 50 hymns contains a single descant (hymn No. 45). The successor of the  「讃美歌」("Sanbika") and its supplements is  「讃美歌21」("Sanbika 21") (1997), which comprises 579 hymns. Interestingly (unfortunately?) not a single hymn has a descant. It appears that at least in the case of the  日本基督教団 (United Church of Christ in Japan) that the idea of including descants in a denominational hymnal was a brief experiment which ended in the 1970's.

Is there a market and/or need for descants in Japan? In this country small churches without choirs are the norm. Even if the addition of descants to their communal singing were possible, it would probably prove more of a distraction from the basic task of singing hymns with small numbers than it would beautify the service. In larger city churches with choirs, Christian-affiliated schools and universities, however, there is certainly room for an increased use of the practice. It is hoped that the ten descants provided here will not only be of practical use, but will spark interest in the practice adding descants to congregational song.

Practical comments on the use and composition of descants.

A. On the use of descants:

1. Descants should only be used on hymns familiar to the congregation. It is essential that the congregation's singing be enhanced, not weakened, by the singing of a descant.

2. Descants must be thoroughly rehearsed and sung confidently by the trebles (sopranos, boys) of the choir. Unsure pitches and weak singing are worse than providing no descant.

3. The organist and choir director should consult with each other to be sure the harmony played by the organist matches that implied by the descant. Certain types of descants require a specific organ accompaniment; others work with the commonly found hymnal harmonization.

4. It is probably best to limit the use of descants to one or two hymns per service, and to use them on only one stanza per hymn. The choice of stanza should be made by reading the hymn text. Last stanzas are not always the best choice.

5. In institutions where descants have not been used it is important to inform the congregation in advance that a descant will be used. A simple explanation and rehearsal should solve many problems before they occur.

6. A certain part of the choir should continue to sing the hymn melody strongly while the upper voices provide the descant. At no time should the hymn melody be inaudible.

B. On the composition of descants:
1. The descant voice is normally written at higher pitches than the hymn melody. However, it may dip lower at points for musical reasons, and it may proceed in unison with the hymn melody for a time in order to reinforce congregational singing.

2. The descant voice must be carefully constructed to make the most, musically, of a very narrow range of pitches. Given that it should normally sound above the hymn melody, and below the absolute top pitch of the descant singers, a range of an octave or less is all the composer has to work with. Generally, for female sopranos, a G can be included in the descant line. For experienced singers, an A may be used. Higher pitches are to be treated with caution unless one's singers are capable of singing them with beauty.

3. Normal compositional rules hold true for descants – they should stand on their own, musically, and need definite climaxes. Too much use of the top pitches of the range dilute the strength of the descant. Save these for important musical or textual points.

4. Descants are effective with instruments as well as voices. A trumpet playing a descant with a full congregation singing heartily is one of the most thrilling of musical worship experiences. When composing for instruments, however, take into account their essential nature, and above all, their effective ranges. A trumpet descant might well include dotted rhythms and melodic flourishes, while a flute descant may be more
effective with a cantabile setting.

Descant collection. Readers are welcome to reproduce the following descants for their own use. All compositions are copyrighted by Scott Shaw. The descants may be downloaded from the author's homepage: http://scottshaw.org/?page_id=150 Comments are welcome by email at shaw@rikkyo.ne.jp