

Lift Ye Then Your Voices¹

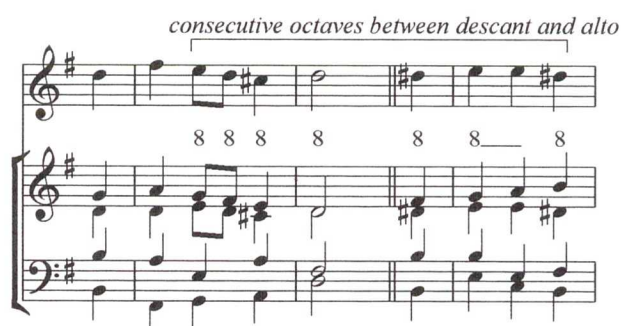
Observations on descants and hints on composing them

Dr Christopher Maxim

Barry Williams' comments² on Simon Lole's descant to John Ewington's hymn tune *Hillbrow*,³ and the descants by Roger Wilkes and Humphrey Clucas composed in response⁴ have prompted me to share some observations on descants and to offer some tips on composing them. This short article does not purport to be a comprehensive history or survey of what is today understood in church music circles by the term 'descant', nor is it a complete guide to their composition; but I hope that it will be of both interest and value to fellow members of the Guild – particularly to those who write descants, or who would like to try their hand at composing them.

I believe that one of the first 'mainstream' hymn books to include a handful of descants was *Hymns Ancient & Modern Revised*⁵ (henceforth *AMR*). In *AMR*, the descants are printed above the standard harmonies, rather than with special organ accompaniments; and there are numerous instances of consecutive octaves between the descant and one or other of the inner voices (alto/tenor).⁶ A good example of such an arrangement is Alan Gray's⁷ descant to *Hanover*, which appears twice in *AMR*.⁸ I cite it because there is a relatively extended passage of consecutive octaves between the descant and the alto: from the end of the second line to the beginning of the third.

Figure 1: Extract from the *AMR* version of Alan Gray's descant to Hanover⁹



Had this texture offended the sensibilities of the majority of church musicians, then this descant in its *AMR* form would surely not have found its way into more recent hymn books, such as *Hymns Ancient and*

1 From 'Glory be to Jesus' (18th cent., translated by E. Caswall). A descant to this hymn by the author of this article will be found at: <http://www.scoreexchange.com/scores/70749.html>

2 *Laudate* no. 92 (May 2017), p. 10

3 *Laudate* no. 91 (January 2017), p. 36

4 *Laudate* no. 92 (May 2017), pp 11-12

5 Musical editors: Sidney Nicholson, G. H. Knight, J. Dykes Bower (Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 1950)

6 In his letter to the editor of *Laudate* (no. 92, p.10) Barry Williams criticises the consecutive octaves between the descant and the original hymn tune and its harmonies (he mentions four; but, by my reckoning, there are a total of eleven pairs if you include the dotted rhythm in the descant in b. 3 against the crotchets in the tenor, and the consecutives by contrary motion between descant and bass in the final cadence).

7 Alan Gray (1855-1935)

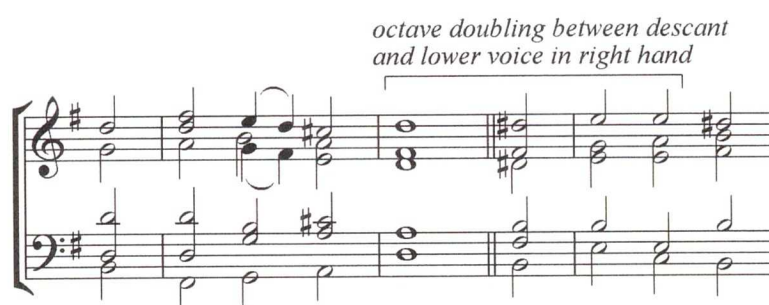
8 In A flat with hymn 167 ('O worship the King all glorious above') and in G with 506 ('Disposer supreme, and Judge of the earth')

9 Op. cit.

*Modern New Standard Version (AMNS)*¹⁰, *New English Hymnal (NEH)*¹¹ and *Common Praise (CP)*¹² – though it should be noted that all of these books are from the Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd stable.

The *AMR* version of Gray's descant is not, however, what the composer had published thirty years earlier in *A Book of Descants*¹³. This volume contains over 130 descants (all by Gray) and, in every case, the organ accompaniment is specially composed (adapted). Gray tends not to alter the original harmony (e.g. by introducing more chromatic chords); but he does adapt the voicing so that the organ plays the descant at pitch, and consecutive octaves between the top of the texture and the inner voices are eschewed. On the other hand, Gray does sometimes employ sub-octave doubling of the descant within his organ textures. This is not the same as consecutive octaves, being to do with the flesh of the texture, not the skeleton of the harmony. Additionally, Gray not infrequently thickens the texture to more than four voices. Both of these features are, of course, perfectly acceptable in keyboard music that is not strictly contrapuntal.

Figure 2: Extract from Alan Gray's descant to *Hanover* as published in *A Book of Descants*¹⁴



I do not know whether Gray approved of the way that his descants appeared in *AMR* (he died some fifteen years before it went into print); but I think it is worth underlining that he had published well-crafted accompaniments to his descants long before they were printed in *AMR*'s more economical/cruider form. It is surely of significance that more recent hymn books have included special organ accompaniments for at least some descants – though not usually Gray's, despite there being a proper organ accompaniment in *A Book of Descants* for each of those that I have come across in other hymn books. Indeed, *NEH* provides just the last line of Gray's accompaniment to *Darwall's 148*¹⁵ since his descant otherwise makes consecutive octaves with the bass. An example of a descant that is included in a hymn book with its proper accompaniment is Arthur Hutchings' last verse arrangement of *Neander* in *NEH*¹⁶. In this case, the special accompaniment is absolutely essential because the descant does not 'work' with the original harmonies. Clearly there is recognition among the music editors of more recent hymn books (and Hutchings was a member of the editorial committee of *NEH*) that, if a hymn book is to contain at least a few excellent descants, it will be necessary to find the space for a special organ part for some of them. One of the qualities of Alan Gray's descants is how elegant, tuneful and memorable they are, while so often marrying with the original harmonies.

So what practical guidance might composers of descants draw from this in terms of whether it is acceptable to write a descant without special accompaniment that makes consecutive octaves with the original harmonies? I should like to suggest that such descants are acceptable *if they are good descants*.

10 Musical editors/committee not identified (Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 1984)

11 Committee: Anthony Caesar, Christopher Dearnley, Martin Draper, Michael Fleming, Arthur Hutchings, Colin Roberts, George Timms (Chairman) (The Canterbury Press Norwich (a publishing imprint of Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd), 1986)

12 Committee: Henry Chadwick (Chairman), Lionel Dakers, Timothy Dudley-Smith, Gordon Knights, Patricia Nappin, J. Richard Watson, Allan Wicks, Robert Willis (The Canterbury Press Norwich on behalf of Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 2000)

13 Cambridge University Press, 1920

14 Op. cit., no. 41a (p. 33)

15 *NEH*, no. 475: Ye holy angels bright

16 *NEH*, no. 351: Come, ye faithful, raise the anthem

Nevertheless, specially-composed accompaniments are preferable, not only because consecutive octaves can be avoided, but also because they give opportunities to vary the harmonies and intensify the drama – though hopefully within the bounds of ecclesiastical decorum and good musical taste!

So what makes a ‘good descant’? Any such definition will be, to a greater or lesser extent, a matter of opinion. Nevertheless, I believe that there are some key ingredients that may serve as useful rules of thumb.

1 Independence of the descant in relation to the melody

The descant ought not to follow the contour of the melody too much: it should be an independent counterpoint. An exception to this is where the composer doubles the melody harmonically (in thirds or sixths) to achieve a particular effect, as in the example below.

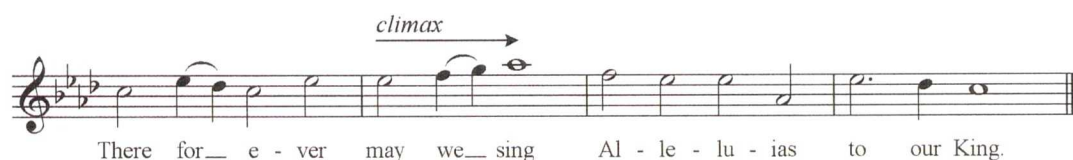
Figure 3: Extract from David Willcocks’ descant to Puer nobis ¹⁷



2 Quality of the descant as a melody

While the descant *might* not be quite as fine a melody as the original hymn tune, the composer should nevertheless seek to compose an elegant, interesting melodic line. To be elegant it must have a good shape, without ungainly leaps; and to be interesting it should not make over-use of a small number of notes. It should have a reasonably wide range so that the singers are not in the stratosphere for the whole verse, especially if it is relatively long. There should be a melodic climax: often this will be in or just before the last line, as in the example below.

Figure 4: Extract from unattributed descant to Dix ¹⁸



3 Not too ‘fussy’

The descant should not be too intricate: subdivisions of the beat (particularly quarter divisions, i.e. divisions of crotchet beats into semiquavers) and rhythmic complexities (syncopations) should be employed judiciously, as in the example below.

Figure 5: Extract from Arthur Hutchings’ descant to Neander ¹⁹



¹⁷ *Carols for Choirs 1*, edited and arranged by Reginald Jacques and David Willcocks (Oxford University Press, 1961), no. 43 (pp. 154-156): Unto us is born a Son

¹⁸ *AMR*, no. 79: As with gladness men of old

¹⁹ Op. cit.

4 Dissonances

Dissonances must be handled with care. They will usually be more effective when treated as passing-notes, suspensions, appoggiaturas or cambiatas (not least because they are easier to sing) than when they are applied freely/haphazardly. It should also be remembered that dissonances create moments of musical stress and so a very dissonant descant may create a stressful last verse when a sense of exhilaration is actually what is required. In David Willcocks' descant to *Irby* there is a highly effective use of a dissonance where a suspension in the melody (on 'wait' in the example below) is made against the descant and the harmony of the accompaniment.²⁰

Figure 6: Extract from David Willcocks' descant to *Irby* ²¹

*suspension in melody; but note how
the descant accentuates the dissonance*

All in white shall wait a-round.
All in white shall wait a-round.

5 Chromatic notes

Chromatic notes used sparingly can have enormous impact, but their good effect is usually inversely proportional to the amount they are used. For me it would not be Christmas without the spine-tingling effect of the single chromatic note (a flattened leading-note) towards the end of Sir Thomas Armstrong's descant to *Forest Green*!

Figure 7: Extract from Thomas Armstrong's descant to *Forest Green* ²²

*flattened leading-note
makes dramatic climax*

O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.

6 Going under the melody

The descant may occasionally go below the melody, but if it does so too much it tends to get lost in the texture and loses its sense of musical 'uplift'. It is therefore better to reserve this device for those moments

²⁰ This device is actually used twice in this arrangement

²¹ *Carols for Choirs* 2, edited and arranged by David Willcocks and John Rutter (Oxford University Press 1970), no. 31 (pp. 148-149): Once in royal David's city

²² *Carols for Choirs* 1, no. 27 (pp 92-93): O little town of Bethlehem

Figure 8: Extract from David Willcocks' descant to *Adeste fideles* ²³



7 Consecutive octaves between the descant and the alto/tenor

It may be argued that consecutive octaves are tolerable between a descant and an *inner* voice in the organ accompaniment (as long as that inner voice is not being sung) because the ear focusses principally on the interplay between the descant and the melody, on the bass at a secondary level, and only then on the internal notes that complete the harmonies. In other words, where there are consecutive octaves between an *inner* voice and the descant, it may be regarded as (sub-)octave doubling by the accompaniment.²⁴

8 Consecutive octaves/unisons between descant and melody

The descant should never progress by consecutive octaves (or unisons) with the melody since the effect is very weak. On the other hand, it is permissible for the descant to double the melody at the octave or the unison if this is to achieve a particular effect. In such instances, it is advisable to double the melody for several notes so that it is clear that the effect is intentional. The exception to this rule is the start of lines where the descant might double the melody for just a couple of notes or so (suggesting there is no descant), and then ‘takes flight’, as in the example below.

Figure 9: Extract from Thomas Armstrong's descendant to Forest Green ²⁵



9 Consecutive octaves between descant and bass

The bass is the foundation of the harmony and, if the descant makes consecutive octaves in *similar* motion²⁶ with it, the whole harmony is weakened. The device is therefore to be avoided. Consecutive octaves by *contrary* motion, on the other hand, are tolerable. I am unaware of any instances of a Gray descant making consecutive octaves in similar motion with the bass (in either their *A Book of Descants* or *AMR* form), but there are examples of consecutive octaves by contrary motion.²⁷ Nevertheless, I can think of examples of descants by eminent contemporary church composers that have consecutive octaves by similar motion between the descant and the bass, so I realise that I am sticking my neck out on this point!

23 *Carols for Choirs* 1, no. 26 (pp. 88-91): O come, all ye faithful

24 And do not forget that the melody will usually be sung in octaves between the upper and lower voices. This, too, is octave doubling, not consecutive octaves.

25 Op. cit.

26 Also known as 'parallel octaves'

27 E.g. *A Book of Descants*, no. 1 (*Aberystwyth*), bar 1; end of line 2/start of line 3; penultimate bar

10 Consecutive fifths

Ordinarily, the descant should never make consecutive fifths by similar or contrary motion with any voice. A possible exception – and a rare one at that – is if there are consecutive fifths in the original harmonies. Gordon Slater's artful *St Botolph*²⁸ is an example.

11 Imitation

Imitation between the melody and descant can be effective but should not be done at the expense of the text, which may become garbled, or the melodic line, which may become clogged with notes. The example below shows brief imitation successfully employed.

Figure 10: Extract from Arthur Hutchings' descant to Neander²⁸



12 Altering the text of the hymn

It is preferable to set the whole of the original text in the descant whenever possible. Sometimes, however, it just is not possible to cram in every last word: if there has been a rest in the descant or a note has been sustained for several beats for dramatic effect, for instance. It is better to prune (but so that the words still make sense) rather than to paraphrase; and it is best to avoid introducing additional/new words if at all possible. David Willcocks' descant to *Noel* features an unusually large amount of pruning of the text in the descant and even introduces a word foreign to the original text in the last line, as may be seen in the example below.

Figure 11: David Willcocks' descant to Noel²⁹

28 AMR 450, AMNS 360, and 473, NEH 385, CP 238 and 305

29 *Carols for Choirs* 2, no. 21 (pp. 89-91): It came upon the midnight clear

13 Special organ accompaniments

If composing a special organ part for a descant, any of the following is permissible:

- not to double the descant at the unison in the accompaniment at all, e.g. Thomas Armstrong's arrangement of *Forest Green*³⁰
- to double the descant at the unison in the accompaniment for some but not all of the time, e.g. David Willcocks' arrangement of *Mendelssohn*³¹
- to double it in the accompaniment throughout, e.g. Reginald Jacques' arrangement of *Good King Wenceslas*³²

A careful balance needs to be achieved between an organ texture that is too thin or too thick. A special accompaniment creates opportunities for some of the features mentioned above: exciting chromatic harmonies, 'crunchy' dissonances, imitation, etc. – but composers who enter this particular sweet shop must remember what happens to those who gorge themselves unrestrained on such goodies!

* * *

In the 'rules' that I have set out above, I have deliberately used examples that I believe will be very familiar to many readers, rather than citing descants from recent collections, despite the excellence of many. I am sure that there are many other 'rules' that could be added to the above list – indeed, the topic could occupy a small book. Whether I practise what I preach is, of course, another matter! Should readers feel curious, they may judge for themselves by visiting my Score Exchange page where they will find many descants that may be downloaded and performed free of charge:

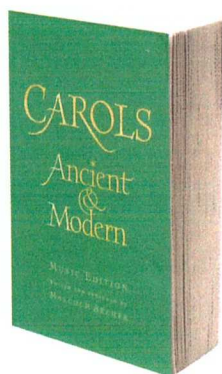
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³⁰ Op. cit.

³¹ *Carols for Choirs* 1, no. 14 (pp. 39-41): *Hark! the herald angels sing*

³² *Carols for Choirs* 1, no. 13 (pp. 34-38)