



AGO Certification Exams

SPC Study Guide

Last Updated June 2026

Prepared by the Committee on Professional Certification

Edited by Dr. Michelle Kardos, DMA, MT-BC, CAGO
AGO Director of Education

American Guild of Organists National Headquarters
and THE AMERICAN ORGANIST Magazine
475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1260, New York, NY 10115
(212) 870-2310. www.agohq.org. info@agohq.org.

Forward

One of the stated purposes of the American Guild of Organists is “to improve the proficiency of organists and choral conductors. ” To foster this improvement, as well as to recognize it, the Guild provides an opportunity for evaluating, by examination, attainments in organ playing, choral techniques, conducting, and the theory and general knowledge of music, and to grant certificates to those who pass such examinations at specified levels of attainment.

The Service Playing Certificate (SPC) Study Guide is proof of your interest in the Service Playing Exam, and therefore of your interest in personal growth and professional development. While it is certainly possible to grow without formal examinations, pursuing certification provides clear goals and structure. The successful completion of an examination and the resulting certificate is not only a cause for personal satisfaction but also evidence of your personal and professional dedication to your skills.

All of the Guild's certification examinations are demanding at their respective levels. A common reflection among candidates is: “Even if I don’t pass on the first try, I’ve gained valuable skills and knowledge just by preparing.” Depending on training and experience, many who take these examinations are successful on their first try; others may require more time to advance their skills. For the latter, it is important to remember that the primary goals of exam study and preparation are growth and learning, not discouragement. While the earning of a Guild certificate is an appropriate reward, the real prize is becoming better at what you do.

By preparing for the Service Playing Exam, you are helping raise not only your own standards, but those of the church or synagogue you represent, and as we continue to do this collectively, of congregations throughout the country.

Congratulations on taking this important step forward!

- *AGO National Committee on Professional Certification*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Forward		1
Introduction		5
Chapter 1	Effective Practice	10
Chapter 2	Prepared Repertoire	20
Chapter 3	Hymn Transposition	33
Chapter 4	Hymn Playing	41
Chapter 5	Psalm Playing	55
Chapter 6	Vocal Solo & Anthem Accompaniment	56
Chapter 7	Sight-Reading	58
Resources		64

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE STUDY GUIDE

The Service Playing Exam represents the first level of achievement among the various certification examinations administered by the American Guild of Organists. This is not meant to imply that the Service Playing Exam is simple: at its own level, it is just as demanding as the more difficult examinations are at their levels. The first piece of advice, therefore, is: do not underestimate the exam. The Service Playing Exam is designed to challenge the candidate and to demonstrate a level of skill and musicianship equal to the task of playing all the musical parts of a worship service in such a way as will enhance worship, rather than distract from it.

The second piece of advice is: Do not overestimate your own ability and preparedness as you approach the exam. Certain skills and challenges which you will encounter on the exam may not be part of your usual service-playing experience; your level of competence may be sufficient to elicit warm compliments from your congregation, but may fall short of equipping you adequately for the exam.

This Study Guide is intended as an aid to your study and preparation, not a guarantee that you will successfully pass the exam. It will attempt to be your coach, suggesting ways to approach the various disciplines, encouraging your progress, and teaching you some of the fine points of the game. But at game time, out on the field, as it were, the responsibility for doing well rests with you.

The 2026 revision of the Service Playing exam Study Guide was created to incorporate changes and repertoire additions to the exam since 1998. Thus, this study guide includes material related to the following exam items: Organ Repertoire, Transposition, Hymn Playing, Psalm Playing, Choral & Vocal Solo Accompanying, and Sight-Reading. This Study Guide is based on the work of Lester H. Groom, AAGO, the author of the first Service Playing Exam Study Guide in 1985 and the updates worked on by subsequent certification committees. Much of the text has been retained, and the AGO Professional Certification Committee wishes to acknowledge with thanks the value of his continuing contribution to this present work. Thanks also to Sarah Harr, DMA, FAGO, and Denise Lanning, MM, FAGO, for their review and edits for the 2026 edition.

ALL ABOUT THE EXAM

Unlike all other AGO certification examinations, whose dates are fixed, the Service Playing Exam may be taken at any time between October 1 and March 31, as long as an application has been made at least one month in advance of the chosen exam date. Requirements, the Manual of Procedure, and the Service Playing Certificate Application may be found on the AGO website, agohq.org/certification.

The Service Playing Exam may be taken at any chapter, as no local examiners are involved. The exam is proctored by a duly appointed chapter member. The Service Playing Exam will be recorded at a site with a suitable organ and recording equipment, and then sent to AGO Headquarters for evaluation by two national

examiners. The recording must be continuous, completely unedited, and provided as a single track. The exam proceeds item by item according to the requirements, with the proctor announcing each section on the recording and serving as a page-turner if one is desired.

Each examiner is familiar with this Study Guide. The performer is thus assured that each examiner listens not necessarily for their own preferred interpretation, registration, or technique, but for generally accepted style and registrational appropriateness. In addition, examiners accept correct notes and rhythms as only the beginning, beyond which are considered evidence of thoughtful preparation, musical cohesiveness, and clarity of musical intent.

ABOUT PREPARATION

Preparation for any Guild examination is a long-term process. Don't wait until the last month or two to begin practicing for the exam, expecting to pass it; the ideal time to begin preparation is as soon as the requirements are published, annually, in the July issue of *The American Organist*. Think about this: if you could pass the exam easily, it would not represent such a significant accomplishment. For the exam to have meaning and stature, it is designed to make you reach a bit. Do not approach it lightly!

The possibility that exam requirements might change from year to year makes it unwise to begin preparing during one academic year for an exam during the following year. However, if study begins in the late summer, an exam date early the next spring within the same academic year, it would be extremely reasonable. And for best results, you should plan to schedule a considerable amount of practice time on the exam instrument, taking into account the following considerations:

1. Keyboard touch (particularly if the exam instrument is a mechanical action 'tracker' organ).
2. Bench height. Be prepared to furnish wooden bench blocks if added height is needed.
3. Console layout. Disposition of manual keyboards and placement of stops and combination pistons can differ widely between instruments.
4. Pedal keyboard configuration. How many keys are in the pedalboard? Is it flat, straight, concave, or radiating?
5. Distance of the console from the sound source. (The sound delay resulting from distant pipes can be very disconcerting to one who is accustomed to the immediacy of sound emanating from nearby pipes or speakers.)
6. Room acoustics. Different acoustic environments call for adjustments in tempo, touch, and articulation.

USE OF THIS GUIDE

This Study Guide is intended as an educational resource. But it can offer only guidelines: models, procedures, and suggestions for the kinds of study and practice which the individual candidate must develop for themselves. Moreover, the Study Guide does not stand by itself: the candidate should also obtain from Headquarters a copy of the current year's examination requirements and become thoroughly familiar with them.

Finally, this Study Guide can be used in a variety of ways: as an aid to individual preparation; as a resource for small-group study sessions; as a text for courses organized by local Guild chapters, college music departments, or Guild Student Groups; and as a resource on which single-topic chapter programs or classes may be based, whether or not these lead to preparation for the examinations.

CHAPTER 1:

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Effective practice is not so much a matter of time spent as it is the way in which that time is utilized. Efficient use of practice time greatly magnifies what one can accomplish within a given time period. Here are some general ideas about practice time, followed by specific suggestions for developing an efficient and effective approach to practicing. Most of these ideas are not new and are probably known to many of us. Still, because it is so easy to forget or overlook them, they are presented here in the form of a checklist. In your playing, you may find that when something fails to fall into place, even after a reasonable amount of time and effort has been spent on it, the problem may be due to faulty practice habits. Work at developing and maintaining good habits, and review the checklist periodically to see if your practice routine is on track.

GENERAL IDEAS

1. Practice regularly. You can depend on the fact that a portion of what is learned today will be forgotten by tomorrow, and must be reviewed and reinforced. So, for the best results, practice every day, and even at the same time of day for a similar amount of time, if possible. Practice is most effective when it is a regular part of one's daily routine.

2. Practice on different organs whenever possible. Adapting to the feel, sound, and acoustical environments of a variety of instruments helps to condition us so that minor differences no longer distract or disturb us.
3. Free the mind of other matters, in order to maximize concentration. A good idea is to keep a notebook at the console, and to jot down those mental memos, such as "Don't forget to call Mr. Blank this afternoon," or "I must pick up an anniversary present on the way home." When the memo has been transferred to your notes, the mind is once freer to concentrate. When you are practicing, put your phone on "Do not disturb" while you are at the console.
4. Practice with a page-turner. Some tend to turn early, some late. Some are extremely uneasy, constantly afraid that they might forget to turn, turn at the wrong time, or drop the music. You, the performer, must be prepared against all eventualities. It is wise to memorize a measure or two on either side of a page turn, so that you need never be uneasy about what a page-turner may or may not do. You should also practice this if you plan to turn your own pages as well. If you intend to use your tablet, develop a reliable strategy for advancing to the next page
5. Record your practice sessions. Three reasons: (1) It is amazing how much distraction can be generated just by the knowledge that a recorder is running, preserving, for better or for worse, everything you do! For some people, a recording device is more inhibiting than a room full of listeners.

(2) Few of us are really able to listen objectively to ourselves when we play, but playback does help us to face the truth and to hear ourselves as others hear us. Every uneven tempo, every brushed key or missed accidental, every otherwise-overlooked flaw becomes readily apparent. Identifying one's errors is the first step in correcting them. (3) Your recording can be helpful in preparing your registrations, as recorders placed in different locations can pick up some stops better than others. If the registration you are using is not heard clearly on the recording, consider making some adjustments to your registration or moving the recorder to a different location. The recording device is a valuable tool of our trade!

6. Perform your prepared repertoire in services and for friends whenever possible. As your proficiency increases, use the other disciplines required by the exam in your services also. Transpose a hymn a half- or whole step up or down. In other words, make the exam requirements as much a part of your normal world as possible, and the exam itself will become a mere reflection of that world. The more routine these things become, the fewer issues you will experience when you encounter them on the exam.

ELEMENTS OF PRACTICE

PSYCHOLOGY

Since our extremities are controlled, consciously or subconsciously, by the mind, good practice involves first a conditioning or training of the mind, after which the fingers and feet obey the mind's commands. It is imperative to realize that 99 percent of effective practice is a matter of forming habits, making corrections, and understanding the subconscious mind.

HABITS

The forming of good habits and the breaking of bad ones are a discipline of the mind. We must continually analyze our performance during practice sessions, seeking to develop each correct procedure into a habit, and to keep errors from becoming habitual. Organ playing involves multiple factors that compete for one's attention that the mind is not capable of caring for all of them at once. Thus, good practice involves the early relegation of certain functions to habits, so that attention can be given to other functions.

CORRECTIONS

There is a psychological approach to the correction of mistakes. It involves self-analysis to determine the cause of the error, after which a synthesis of a possible solution is formulated. Do not get into the habit of going back to fix mistakes while you are practicing, but rather mark where the mistake was made and address it with a metronome later in your practicing. A few minutes of focused slow practice is likely

all that is necessary to prevent making that mistake again. One can often go back to fix a mistake without being cognizant that it is a habit, so recording your practice sessions can also help to correct this once and for all.

THE SUBCONSCIOUS MIND

The subconscious plays an important part in the learning process and can be put to use for hours and moments when the conscious mind is occupied with other matters. In this way, the benefits of productive practice periods are stretched far beyond the allotted console hours. The process is simple: If a problem is attacked vigorously with much repetition, it is drilled into the subconscious mind as well as the conscious mind and continues to work at it long after the conscious mind has turned it off. A day or two later, we find the difficulty has been solved. But bear in mind that it was the initial diligence when attacking the problem that enabled the subconscious mind to take over; simply willing the problem to the subconscious mind, wherever that may be, is not enough. This concept, however, is not simply a dream; it has been experienced and confirmed by practicing psychologists. It works!

ACCURACY

The person who plays the organ and is heard again and again 'faking' through difficult sections, or playing rhythms without counting, or using makeshift fingerings, soon is recognized as lacking in training and discipline by examiners. Musicianship and professionalism involve not only talent, but also the willingness to work out details with great accuracy. No wrong notes or rhythmic errors can be blamed on the

composer! Therefore, in order to realize the composer's intent, a superior degree of accuracy is an absolute requirement. (Few among us achieve absolute, 100% accuracy, but that must always be our goal; to strive for less is to achieve much, much less!)

INTERPRETATION

This is the living and vital part of music without which music could be (and, in fact, has been) produced by machine or computer. In each performance, even by the same individual, interpretation is shaded by environment, mental climate, physical condition, audience responsiveness, and other factors. This underscores the essential reality of performance, which is that every performance will be different.

REGISTRATION

Registration must be chosen carefully to be in character, or all other interpretive considerations become more difficult. While some freedom of registration is desirable, for AGO certification exams, it is advisable to keep registration as simple as possible, and when a good registration is developed, it should be adhered to.

EXPRESSION

The word "expression," in one sense, means the employment of the expression pedal, if the instrument has one. Controlled use of the swell pedal is appropriate in the playing of 19th and 20th-century music. But it is important to remember that earlier composers, including Bach, had no such device, and yet performed musically and convincingly. Thus, the use of expression pedals is frowned upon in the performance

of music of the eighteenth century and earlier. But in a larger sense, in this repertoire, as indeed in all repertoire, expressiveness is not achieved by mechanical means; it comes from within the performer, and is communicated by such subtle means as articulation, rhythmic stresses, accents, and rubato, where this is appropriate.

ORGANIZATION

Each aspect of the examination should be a part of your practice routine. Work out a weekly schedule, including exam items S-1 through S-10. If item S-1 and S-2 are emphasized one day, work just a bit at S-3 through S-9, and leave off S-10. The following day, review S-1 and S-2, emphasize S-10, which was omitted yesterday, and work a bit on the remaining items. The next day, review S-10, emphasize S-3 and S-4, etc. In this way, each day one item will be omitted, and one will be given more time, but in a six-day rotation, everything will have been emphasized at least once and practiced to some extent four more times. Keep the schedule flexible, for it is likely that sooner or later you will devote an entire period to one nasty problem that needs your full attention, and if a solution is within sight, it's best to put the schedule on hold while you work things out.

PRACTICE CHECKLIST

- ☑ Slow Practice: Unfamiliar or difficult passages must be practiced slowly at first; proceed with caution and concentration. When habits are built at a slow tempo, the speed may gradually increase. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to quick learning is fast playing in the early stages, or habitually playing a piece of music from start to finish without paying close attention to where mistakes are made.
- ☑ Soft practice: Use soft, gentle stops in the early stages of practice, and when working out technical matters, for two important reasons: (1) Loud tones tend to impair concentration over time because they are tiring. (2) When the registration resembles the sound of a finished performance, it tempts us to go on with the pretense of a finished performance, making it more difficult to face reality and stop to work things out. Even the soft registration ought to be varied occasionally to refresh the ear. Save the full registration until the notes are learned, and it is time to work out stop changes and interpretation.
- ☑ Fingering and Pedaling: If fingerings and pedalings are marked, follow them strictly. If a change is desired from the indicated markings, white out the originals and pencil in the changes; we must use what we see and see what we use. If no fingerings or pedalings are given in the score, it is essential to work some out and write them in, preferably with a colored pencil, which is seen more clearly against a black and white page. Try to discover the most natural fingering (or pedaling) which will allow each

passage to be played correctly. Write in only the important finger numbers; the more numbers you include, the fewer you see! Never neglect this important task; the little extra time it takes is more than made up for in increased learning speed achieved by playing with consistent fingering and pedaling.

- ☑ Reference Marks: Make reference marks to indicate difficult or problematic passages and work on these passages first when starting to practice. Peak concentration comes early on in a practice session, and the easier passages may be practiced later, when fatigue begins to set in.
- ☑ Making Mistakes: An error made once is a mistake. Made twice, it is a habit in the making. By the third time, it is a habit that needs to be broken. Therefore, not a single error can be overlooked. Furthermore, a hesitation or even an insecure feeling must be counted as an error. For had there not been any hesitation, there most likely would have been a mistake! It is necessary to realize and admit this; otherwise, the danger spot in question may never be properly dealt with and may cause problems at exam time.
- ☑ Small Sections: Do not practice an entire piece straight through; frequent repetition of one small section at a time results in faster learning overall, or for simultaneous difficulties, it is usually best to break up the music into smaller component problems. Often, the difficulty is one of coordination between the left hand and the pedal. Try multiple combinations, such as left hand alone, pedal alone, or left hand and pedal together. Not until these are working should the right hand be added. In other cases, it may be best to practice right hand and pedal alone, or

hands together without pedaling, or all together very slowly. The important thing here is to isolate the difficulties and deal with them one by one.

- ☑ Freeze: When something goes terribly wrong, don't recoil from the keyboard in horror! Keep the keys depressed until you can find where the error is occurring; then you will know what to fix. Keep in mind that making music means recovering well, and often. When an error occurs, do your best to keep going, no matter what.

THE FOUR MENTAL STEPS OF CORRECTING ERRORS

1. Admit there was an error. It isn't enough to say, "Oh, I didn't mean that; I'll try to remember not to do that next time." Chances are, you will not remember. Admit the mistake and stop to fix it.
2. Figure out what went wrong and why. Analyze the cause of the error. Was it faulty fingering? Lack of concentration? Misconception of direction or reach? Carelessness? You need to know what caused the error in order to correct it.
3. Develop a cure. Depending on what went wrong, the cure may be a known and standard sort of procedure. Or it may involve inventing an exercise or drill to strengthen a technical weakness in fingers or feet.
4. Put the cure into effect, repeating it several times. Then make a run at the passage from a few measures back to be sure that the correction sticks.

CHAPTER 2

PREPARED REPERTOIRE

(Items S-1, S-7, & S-10)

CHOOSING YOUR SELECTIONS

From year to year, the lists of repertoire in the Service Playing Exam requirements may change slightly, but repertoire will remain consistent in terms of difficulty level and stylistic variety. In making your selection from the current list, two criteria may be helpful:

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Choose repertoire that may be useful to you later, in your church, teaching, or recital activity.
2. Choose repertoire that can be practiced on your instrument without adaptation; for instance, if your pedalboard goes up to high F, avoid pieces that use high G.
3. Choose works which appeal to you personally, which you feel you would enjoy playing, which would represent real progress to you. This includes your comfort level with technique and style, of course.
4. Remember also that the real value of the Service Playing Exam is to aid in your musical development, so that it is much more to the point to learn new pieces, rather than to recycle old ones you already know. Incidentally,

it may be more difficult to unlearn bad habits that have crept into familiar pieces than to learn new ones correctly from the first note.

AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS

1. As mentioned, choose repertoire you are likely to enjoy: it is easier to communicate with a listener through your music when you yourself are enthusiastic. But remember that your own enjoyment of a composition grows as you become more familiar with it, so give a new piece some time before passing judgment on it.
2. Take into account both the room and the organ to be used on the exam, choosing repertoire that will sound appropriate in that place. You would hope, for instance, not to have to play a very expressive 19th-century composition on a tracker organ with no enclosed divisions.

LEARNING ABOUT YOUR SELECTIONS

As you begin practicing the music, try to learn everything you can about it and its composer. The following are some suggestions to help you give an intelligent and meaningful performance.

1. Read the composer's biography, noting the historical period to which the composer belongs (baroque, romantic, modern, etc.). Learn the composer's dates and nationality, as well as the names of other composers of the same period, and major geopolitical events of that time.

2. Listen to other pieces by the same composer, including works for media other than organ, such as orchestral, instrumental, vocal, and choral works. One gains valuable insights into Brahms's organ music, for example, by carefully listening to his symphonies, piano works, and the German Requiem.

TECHNICAL PREPARATION

Number all measures, beginning with the first complete measure, for general reference purposes. Work out fingerings and pedalings and mark only the essential fingerings and pedalings, rather than every note. Strive to discover fingerings which employ, as much as possible, normal five-finger positions. As you work these out, pencil them in lightly first. If they seem to work well, darken them, or (as suggested earlier) make them more visible with colored pencil. But if, after several attempts, your fingerings still feel awkward or unreliable, reconsider what you have done and make further changes as necessary. As a rule, one should aim for the simplest, most natural fingering. Fingerings that are intricate or complex may show great ingenuity, but are ultimately counterproductive if simpler ones can be found that work as well.

One final note in this regard: no two people have exactly the same hands and feet. Composers and editors tend to include fingerings that work with their own hands and pedal indications according to their own pedal technique. If what is printed in the music is not right for you, change it. There is no merit in using someone else's fingering unless it works.

Accidentals can be tricky. Pay careful attention to every accidental as you encounter it, and in the early learning process, quickly scan the rest of the measure to see if that note recurs, in which case the accidental must be repeated until the next bar line. Don't be reluctant to pencil in the correct accidentals whenever there is the likelihood that failure to do so will result in a playing error.

RHYTHM

Be rigorous in your pursuit of rhythmic accuracy. Don't guess at complex patterns; figure them out carefully. An example of a rhythmic figure that is almost always played incorrectly is the opening of Bach's Toccata in D Minor, BWV 565. Most frequently in the performance of this work, an accent is heard on the G beginning the downward run, and another one on the C#, tapering off onto the D. But a closer analysis of the notation yields some surprises. If this half-measure is broken down into sixteenth-note units, it will be found that the metrical accents occur on the first rest and on the E, with a final accent on D. This produces a logical (and delightful) rhythmic structure. It is too easy to play something the way we think we have always heard it; nevertheless, the extra work of counting it out often yields pleasant surprises.

TEMPO

Make certain that your chosen tempo is appropriate to the composition. Guard against rushing, which is often a result of nervousness or insecurity. Keep the tempo steady. A metronome can be of great help while practicing. Employ rubato carefully,

even sparingly, when appropriate: done to excess, it can be perceived as unpreparedness.

Look ahead to the most complex, difficult, or most rapidly moving portion of the work. Decide on the appropriate speed for that passage and transfer that tempo back to the beginning. You should also consider the unit of value—the smallest regularly occurring note value—and key your tempo to it. This is especially good advice when playing fugues and other works whose opening measures appear deceptively simple.

INTERPRETIVE PREPARATION

Develop your musical imagination. Think and hear each sound as expressive and unforced. Think and hear infinitely varied, living, breathing phrases. Think and hear how all the parts, individual tones and entire phrases, flow together in a long line to produce... the whole." -*Corliss Arnold*

Think of a one or two-word adjective which describes your feelings about the work you are playing. Such words as angry, peaceful, powerful, etc. are useful. Even more helpful are words like delicate, tidy, massive, savage, ethereal, and so on. Consider this example: for Bach's great G-Minor Fugue, BWV 542, the word magnificent, while accurate, seems both overused and insufficient. Perhaps immense gives a better sense of the size of the piece, but a word like lofty best conveys the work's intent. Allow yourself time to think about conceptual matters like these, and you are far more apt to shape a performance which communicates something meaningful to your listener beyond the notes on the printed page.

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

Phrasing, articulation, the treatment of ornaments, and observance of certain performance-related customs and traditions all belong to the realm of performance practice and thus have some bearing on both the technical and interpretive aspects of one's playing. With today's concern for authentic performance, more emphasis than ever is being placed on performing in ways that convey the composer's original intent and/or manner of performance, insofar as that can be determined. In the study of pre-romantic music, this concern has led to the building of mechanical-action and classically voiced organs, to a rethinking of tempo and rhythm, various approaches to ornamentation, and even a study of historic fingerings. A baroque or pre-baroque piece learned twenty years ago probably needs to be restudied in the light of contemporary scholarship before performing it on an AGO examination.

SELECTED EXAMPLES FROM THE EXAM REPERTOIRE

This section of the chapter focuses on representative selections from the Service Playing Exam Repertoire. A glance at the exam requirements will reveal that the pieces chosen for inclusion here in no way cover the entire range of choices. And it should not be inferred that these pieces are somehow the preferred choices from among the exam's repertoire options. Rather, these pieces were selected because they raise a variety of technical and interpretive issues that need to be effectively

addressed by the countless ways to interpret any piece of music, and one should not simply imitate what one hears on a recording. Nonetheless, it is hoped that recorded examples will serve as a starting point for the candidate's own creative engagement.

REPERTOIRE GROUP A

1. Johann Sebastian Bach: from *Orgelbüchlein*
 - a. The *Orgelbüchlein* (“Little Organ Book”) is a collection of 46 short organ chorales composed around 1717. Apparently, Bach planned a collection of 165 such pieces but never completed the set. Whatever their intended purpose—liturgy, teaching, or both – the *Orgelbüchlein* settings are rich in content and expression despite their small scale.
 - b. The *Orgelbüchlein* settings have several traits in common. One is their brevity: Bach allots only a small page (or at most two) to each, inking in the name of the choral ahead of time. (Some pages are blank except for the planned title.) Hence, brevity is a deliberate ground rule. Also, the pieces are soprano-dominated, with the melody uppermost. Another trait is the variety of style and texture. Still another is there are no examples of the phrase-by-phrase treatment so typical of Buxtehude and others, the melody accompanied by *vorimitation* (the accompaniment crafted from the melody and introducing it ahead of the solo line).
 - c. Let's look at *Wer nur den lieben Gott (BWV 642)*. In this piece, the material centers on three distinct ideas: (1) the chorale melody, prominently presented without elaboration in the highest voice, (2) a primarily

stepwise figure in the inner parts which is essentially rhythmic in character, based on a recurrent pattern of sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and (3) a more angular pedal line, which occasionally employs some of the same rhythmic motives of the alto and tenor parts. Although a variety of approaches to this work are possible -from quiet reflection to unrestrained exuberance-all depend upon a clean and articulate handling of the rhythmic figures in the lower voices.

d. Whatever registration is employed, the piece is to be played on one manual. Try using a manual plenum (Principals 8', 4', 2', and Mixture), with pedal to balance. (A 16' or 8'pedal reed might have been added also.) Note the consistently clear articulation in the lower voices, as well as the way in which the rhythmic figures are organized into distinct groupings. As mentioned, other interpretations of this work are possible; these may imply a gentler approach to registration. Note that in both this piece and the next, fermatas are used simply to mark the ends of phrases in the chorale melody; they in no way imply holding or stopping points.

2. Johann Sebastian Bach: *Fugue in B flat Major* from Eight Short Prelude and Fugues.

a. Tradition ascribes this work to Bach, along with the rest of the eight short preludes and fugues, although it is almost certainly the work of one of his students (either Johann Ludwig Krebs or his father Ludwig Tobias). As with all fugues, one should play this in a straightforward fashion, with an articulate touch. Try detaching the notes slightly, especially in figures such as are found in measures 3 and 4, leaning on the strong beats to help

clarify the underlying pulse. Check your tempo often with the metronome to ensure that the tempo doesn't change with each voice entry. One registration might be a light, clear, principal chorus of 8', 4' 2' and mixture, with a light 16' reed in the pedal.

3. Dietrich Buxtehude: *Chorale prelude on Nun Komm, der Heiden Heiland*, Bux WV 211.
 - a. Buxtehude wrote approximately 70 compositions based on chorale tunes, either chorale preludes or chorale fantasias. A typical Buxtehude chorale prelude might begin with the accompaniment, suggesting the cantus before the solo voice enters, a technique called *vortimitation*. In still other cases, Buxtehude composes something akin to a choral fantasia: the melody is part of a rich concerted texture rather than as an ornamented cantus firmus.
 - b. *Nun Komm, der Heiden Heiland*, Bux WV 211, based on the well-known Advent chorale, is written in the ornamented cantus firmus style. The ornamented melody is often played on the pitches of the cornet – 8', 4', 2 2/3', 2', and 1 3/5' with an accompaniment of 8' (4') on the secondary manual and 16' and 8' Bourdons in the pedal part. The tempo is unhurried, allowing for great freedom of expression.

REPERTOIRE GROUP B

4. Felix Mendelssohn: *Prelude in G Major*, op. 37
 - a. Felix Mendelssohn composed six sonata for organ, though they do not precisely follow the convention of sonata form. He also wrote a set of three preludes and fugues, op.37, which are varied in style and of great musical integrity.
 - b. For the *Prelude in G Major*, strive for a clear legato, and pay particular attention to the phrase markings in the score – they are the composer’s own, and Mendelssohn took great care in notating his intentions precisely in this regard. Work out fingerings carefully and be alert to the possibility of reassigning inner parts to one hand or the other. Registration should be based on 8’ flutes perhaps with the addition of a Gemshorn 8’ or Salicional 8’. Tempo works well at metronome marking 56–60 to the dotted quarter note.
5. Louis Vieme: *Berceuse* from *Twenty-four Pieces in Free Style*, opus 31
 - a. These pieces were composed in 1913. (His *Fourth Symphony*, opus 32, came the following year.) These were written so as to be playable on either the pipe organ or the harmonium, a type of reed organ which enjoyed great popularity in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th century. Since the harmonium had no pedalboard (the player's feet were kept busy pumping the bellows), harmonium music was scored for manuals only. Nevertheless, when these pieces are played on the organ, the composer's manual and pedal instructions should be followed. Thus, in *Berceuse*

(Lullaby), the pedal part comes and goes. Notice, too, that the manual and pedal indications follow the usual French custom: letters like “G” (for Grand Orgue) and “R” (for Recit), standing alone, indicate uncoupled manual divisions, while adjacent letters show the manuals coupled. For example, "G. R" means that the Recit (Swell) is to be coupled to the Grand Orgue (Great). In the Berceuse, then, the Swell to Great coupler is to be removed for measures 29–36 and then re-engaged. Vierne also provides explicit registration and tempo directions; follow these and strive for a very fluid legato throughout.

6. Jeanne Demessieux: *Rorate Caeli* from Twelve Choral Preludes on Gregorian Chant Themes for Organ
 - a. Demessieux indicates that *Rorate Caeli* is a choral orné, or ornamented melody. It translates as “Drop Down Dew, Ye Heavens” and is appropriate for Advent. The indicated registration for the melody is the pitches of the cornet – 8’ 4’, 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ ’, 2’ and 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ’. The accompaniment manual is an 8’ Bourdon with Bourdons 16’ and 8’ in the pedal. Notice in measure 26 that a Flute 8’ is added briefly for 4 measures on the accompaniment manual while both hands play there together. The flute is removed at measure 30. Pay close attention to the tempo marking: it is metronome marking 54 to the half note. Select a fingering that allows for the repeated tones in the melody to be as legato as possible, adding to the expressiveness.

REPERTOIRE GROUP C

7. Craig Phillips: *ENGELBERG* from Glad Praises We Sing: Four Preludes for Organ
 - a. The hymn tune ENGELBERG by Charles V. Stanford appears in many American hymnals. American composer Craig Phillips has created a dramatic organ interpretation of this well-known hymn. When approaching this piece, it is important to notice the changing rhythmic figures. Often when rhythm changes, it is easy to allow the pulse to change, so check in often with the metronome to ensure that the pulse is steady. Secondly, determine the space that is needed between repeated chords that occur in the opening measures and throughout. Careful not to let the half note-quarter-half note-quarter rhythm suddenly sound as though you are playing quarter-rest-quarter, etc. Phillips has indicated a full organ registration assuming a large instrument with many resources. Begin the piece on the Swell with the main theme entering in measure 9. Smaller instruments may need to adjust Great, Swell and Solo indications with manual or general pistons, or perhaps in sections such as measure 33 the left hand could be played on the Swell.
8. Florence Prize: *Adoration*
 - a. This piece can work well on a smaller instrument and is especially effective if the division selected for the melody is under expression. The melodic registration indicates Horn, but a reed stop of a gentle nature is preferred. Keep the repeated accompaniment chords as close together as possible for a smooth line. At measure 15 the melody switches to the tenor

voice. At measure 25 there is a registration change to the strings. This change can be easily achieved with a manual piston. There is a return to the original registration following the Da Capo at measure 40, then at measure 14 the piece moves to the Coda. Adoration presents a great opportunity for the player to demonstrate expertise in managing the expression pedal for maximum effectiveness.

9. Robert Powell : *There Is No Rose* from A Medieval Carol Celebration (Seven Christmas Dances for Organ)
 - a. While carols, for the most part, are dances, this particular carol is of a contemplative nature, and this setting supports that. Initially, learn the pedal line first as this is where the melody lies for the first half of the piece. Select a comfortable pedaling plan. You may want to write in more pedal markings than usual. Then learn the accompanying manual part next. When both hands and feet know their parts well, coordinating these two elements will be easier. At measure 34, there is a registration change and the melody switches to the tenor voice. Utilize a general piston here. It isn't mentioned but consider removing the tremolo at measure 34. Again, learning the pedal part alone, hands alone and then putting hands and feet together two groups at a time will make learning more efficient.

CHAPTER 3

HYMN TRANSPOSITION

(Item S-2)

INTRODUCTION TO TRANSPOSITION

Many candidates for the Service Playing Certificate, approaching the exam, seem to fear transposition more than any of the other items. This is not surprising. Most of us are taught, from our earliest music lessons, to play exactly what we read. Thus, we may experience anxiety and even panic when asked to play something in a key different from that in which we see it written.

Fear not! Transposition, approached systematically and logically, can be learned rather quickly. Using the method illustrated here, it is not unusual for a student to transpose, for the very first time, a complete hymn, even to a remote key, within fifteen or twenty minutes. This is done slowly and hesitatingly, of course, but, like any skill, speed and smoothness will develop with practice.













The transpositions you will do for the Service Playing Exam will be based on a hymn of your choosing from the AGO Examination Hymn Booklet. This booklet is available free of charge from AGO National Headquarters to all Service Playing Certificate applicants. But even if you do not have it yet, you may begin practicing transposition with some simple hymns from your own church hymnal. Easy tunes like DUKE STREET, HAMBURG, HYMN TO JOY, and TALLIS' CANON are good places to start.

According to the Service Playing Exam requirements, you will select one hymn from the AGO Examination Hymn Booklet. The required transpositions are indicated in the booklet and will be limited to no more than a major second in either direction. You should prepare the hymn in the specified keys, which may include up a half step, up a whole step, down a half step, and down a whole step, depending on the assignment given.

At the exam, you will be asked to perform the hymn in the required transpositions as listed. This is not transposition at sight. If you have prepared your transpositions carefully and practiced them thoroughly in advance, you should be well prepared for this portion of the exam.

The technique we shall use in our approach to transposition is based on interval recognition. As soon as possible after the principles of this method are understood, you should proceed from well-known hymns to unfamiliar hymns. This will prevent you from transposing by ear, and not by method. In the act of transposition, of course, the ear plays an essential role, but train yourself to transpose by method, and not by guess.

As was already mentioned, this technique is based on reading musical intervals. Before beginning, let's review intervals, both horizontal (melodic) and vertical (harmonic). Here are some intervals; can you name them quickly? If not, you'll need to review your knowledge of intervals before proceeding.

 <p>Minor 2nd 1 Semitones</p>	 <p>Major 2nd 2 Semitones</p>	 <p>Minor 3rd 3 Semitones</p>	 <p>Major 3rd 4 Semitones</p>
 <p>Perfect 4th 5 Semitones</p>	 <p>Tritone 6 Semitones</p>	 <p>Perfect 5th 7 Semitones</p>	 <p>Minor 6th 8 Semitones</p>
 <p>Major 6th 9 Semitones</p>	 <p>Minor 7th 10 Semitones</p>	 <p>Major 7th 11 Semitones</p>	 <p>Perfect Octave 12 Semitones</p>

Although the method of transposition to be presented here is based on interval recognition, other skills you may already possess can prove helpful as well. For instance, if you are skilled at harmonic recognition, you may be able to spot significant harmonies (like II6 or V7 chords) in the original key, and then quickly relocate these same functions in the new key. Likewise, if you have good keyboard facility, your fingers may be able to locate a chord in the new key “by feel” as you read in the original key. The interval system of transposition also works well by itself and is a reliable method for most people.

A METHOD FOR TRANSPOSITION

Let us illustrate the process involved in transposing by interval, using the hymn tune
 AVE VIRGO VIRGINUM ("Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain").

1. Come, ye faith-ful, raise the strain Of tri-um-phant glad-ness!
 2. 'Tis the spring of souls to-day: Christ hath burst His pris-on,
 3. Now the queen of sea-sons, bright With the day of splen-dor,
 4. Nei-ther might the gates of death, Nor the tomb's dark por-tal,

God hath brought His Is-ra-el In-to joy from sad-ness.
 And from three days' sleep in death As a sun hath ris-en;
 With the roy-al feast of feasts, Comes its joy to ren-der;
 Nor the watch-ers, nor the seal, Hold Thee as a mor-tal;

Loosed from Phar-oah's bit-ter yoke Ja-cob's sons and daugh-ters,
 All the win-ter of our sins, Long and dark, is fly-ing
 Comes to glad Je-ru-sa-lem, Who with true af-fec-tion
 But to-day a-midst Thine own Thou didst stand, be-stow-ing

Led them with un-mois-tened foot Through the Red Sea wa-ters.
 From His light, to whom we give Laud and praise un-dy-ing.
 Wel-comes in un-wea-ried strains Je-sus' res-ur-rec-tion.
 That Thy peace which ev-er-more Pass-eth hu-man know-ing.

First, orient your thinking to the key signature of the new key: The old key of F Major has one flat. In the new key of G, the flat is gone, and an F# is added. Then, locate the first chord in the new key by interval: First, move the soprano F up a whole step to G. Next, move the alto C up a whole step to D. Then, move the tenor up a whole step from A to B. You may have noticed that in the original key, the bass note of this chord (F) is an octave below the soprano note. Translating this vertical octave into the new key will quickly yield a G in the bass of the new opening chord. Place your fingers on the new chord and strike the keys simultaneously. Proceed slowly, transposing chord by chord.

In each case, be sure not to sound any notes of a chord until all fingers are in place. Then strike each chord cleanly. This will prevent the clumsy trial-and-error method of transposition by ear. Locate notes in each new chord in this order:

1. Look for common tones between adjacent chords. In this hymn, the alto note of the first and second chords is the same as the soprano note of the third chord. In fact, this same note is repeated in the tenor of the sixth and seventh chords.
2. Find voices (soprano, alto, tenor, or bass) where notes move by the smallest horizontal intervals. Between the fifth and sixth chords of this hymn, the soprano moves one scale step up. In the new key, this means it moves from G to A.
3. In each new chord, look for any vertical doubling. The second chord of the second measure has an octave between tenor and bass. Because the bass note of that second chord doubles the tenor note an octave below, and we already know

what the tenor is (D), because it is the same pitch that the alto played four times in the first measure, the bass will also be a D one octave lower.

4. Transpose the remaining notes in measures one and two by interval. The tenor and bass move down by step between the second and third chords. The tenor is a whole step, but the bass is a half step. Don't forget that the new key signature has an F#. Now, are you ready? Move your fingers to the new chord and play it cleanly.
5. Follow the same procedure as you move from chord to chord through the hymn. Soon you will be able to spot easy melodic (horizontal) interval movements and the doublings very quickly. Sometimes a voice will skip a wider, more difficult interval between chords; in that case, it's often easier to transpose by observing how the note in question fits into the vertical structure of the chord. Work on only one phrase of the hymn until it is learned before going on. Only one accidental occurs in this hymn. It is in the alto of measure 12. Accidentals are easy to deal with: you need not think about the sharps or flats in the new key. First, mentally transpose the diatonic (unaltered) note into the new key, and then, if the accidental is a sharp, raise the transposed note a half step; if the accidental is a flat, lower it a half step. Be alert to the fact that naturals may go either way, depending on the key signature. Here, the B-natural in line 3 becomes a C# in the new key. The B-natural cancelled the B-flat of the original key, so it raised the note by a half step.
6. After you have finished the entire hymn, transpose it one whole step upward, repeat it several times before moving to another transposition. Then try it (perhaps on another day) in E Major (4 sharps). (For the fourth transposition,

you may simply and successfully transpose this hymn into the key of F# by mentally changing the key signature to 6 sharps and reading the notes exactly as they appear. Watch out for those accidentals, though! The B-natural in measure 12 becomes a B#.)

7. After you have practiced this hymn in the required keys, try it in some more remote keys. You will discover that this method of transposition by interval works equally well in all keys, and except for remembering the key signature of the new key, there is no difference in the process from one key to the next.
8. Difficulties often arise between staves – when your eye must jump from one staff to the next on the page. To avoid this, try to see the last chord of the previous staff as though it were imprinted before the first chord on the new staff. If all else fails, find the first chord on the new staff the same way you located the first chord of the hymn, by intervals from the original key. Remember, this will not be a problem on the exam, for there you will be dealing only with prepared and practiced material.
9. From the earliest stages, make a serious effort at playing your transpositions continuously and musically. Keep a steady pulse, even if it is a slow one at first. If you make an error, resist the urge to stop and try to regain your bearings as you go on. During the Service Playing Exam, steadiness and continuity count for a lot, so practice your transpositions until you can play them confidently at an appropriate hymn-singing tempo.
10. The more proficient you become at transposition, the more opportunities you will find to employ this useful skill. Hymn transposition is only the beginning. Solo and anthem accompaniments can often be transposed to great advantage.

Organ pieces, especially those used as hymn preludes, often need to be transposed into the keys of the hymns which they precede. The possibilities are limitless, but the key here, as elsewhere, is careful, deliberate, systematic practice. Invest your time and effort wisely, and you will reap rich musical rewards.

CHAPTER 4

HYMN PLAYING

(Items S-5 & S-9)

INTRODUCTION TO HYMN PLAYING

Just as in item S-2, the hymn for transposition, the hymn-playing portion of the Service Playing Exam requires the use of the AGO Examination Hymn Booklet. The candidate is to select any two hymns from the booklet, except the one chosen for transposition, and to play two stanzas of each as leading a large, enthusiastic congregation. Use of pedals for at least one stanza is mandatory. Some contrast in the presentation of the two stanzas is expected, as is sensitivity to the text (from the Service Playing Exam Requirements). No musical introduction to the hymns is required on the exam.

Good hymn-playing is identified by certain qualities and characteristics which are absent from poor hymn-playing, namely:

1. Accuracy: This should go without saying, but what passes for accuracy in hymn-playing heard in many church services demonstrates the need to say it again and again. All notes in the manual and pedal parts must be correct, as should all the rhythms.

2. Steady tempo: There is no place for tempo rubato in hymn-playing. A steady, metrical pulse is the organist's only means of holding things together, so ritardandi are to be avoided at all costs, until the end of the final stanza. A ritard at any other point compels the singing congregation to slow down, after which it can be very difficult to get things moving again.
3. Touch: A clean touch that is both legato-sounding and articulate is helpful. Overly choppy playing contradicts the essentially vocal nature of a hymn tune, while excessive legato provides insufficient rhythmic drive to lead hymn singing effectively. In real life, the ideal hymn-playing touch will vary from organ to organ, from room to room, even from hymn to hymn. It must be sufficiently legato to be musically supportive, and articulate enough to convey a sense of rhythmic vitality and direction.
4. Leadership: The commonly held notion of an organist accompanying a singing congregation is entirely wrong: it implies that the congregation is doing the leading, and that the organist is just following along. Were this the case, the results would be musically catastrophic - imagine a congregation of, say, 300 singers, each trying to sing at their own tempo, maybe even in their own key! Of course, the reality is just the opposite: it is the organist who does the leading, and, to a large degree, the better the leadership, the better the singing. Thus, the organist must assume command at the console and lead the hymn singing decisively, with consistency and with clarity of purpose. This is not to say that they should pay no attention to the singers; in fact, the opposite is true. The singing congregation is looking to the organist for leadership and direction on every hymn; it is the responsibility of the organist to provide it.

5. Inspiration: Whether you realize it or not, you communicate with your congregation through your hymn-playing. If your approach to hymn-playing is insecure, indifferent, or careless, the congregation will respond accordingly, and the singing will likewise suffer. But if you can convey an attitude of confidence, enthusiasm, and excitement about a hymn, this too is contagious! In some ways, hymns are the most uniquely difficult things to perform musically. They are written to be sung by unrehearsed nonmusicians. Hymns are extremely concise and repetitive: in no other musical form is so exact musical repetition considered normal. Hymns are written as vocal music for the organ. And yet, what a wonderful challenge it is to bring this tiny musical form to life! In the hands of an inspired organist, a good hymn text can convey an entire universe of meaning. It is this kind of enthusiasm and inspired playing for which the examiners are listening.
6. Creativity: There are many ways to make hymn playing more than just a repetitive exercise lasting three or four stanzas. The organist may employ any of a number of creative techniques to enhance the musical interest of the accompaniment. Some of these techniques will be discussed below. This type of creativity is what the examiners hope to hear in the second stanza of each hymn on the Service Playing Examination.

A SUGGESTED METHOD FOR HYMN PRACTICE

The method of practicing hymns described in this section is certainly not the only one possible; indeed, in hymn playing, perhaps more than in most other aspects of our profession, the organist has to find their own way. This is especially true when it comes to the playing of folk-style. Since folk hymnody requires a completely different approach in preparation and performance, the following remarks apply more directly to hymnody in traditional style.

Play the bass line (the lowest notes of the hymn) in the pedal alone. These bass notes should not be doubled in the left hand during the actual playing of the hymn: doing so serves no musical purpose, since manual-to-pedal couplers make the playing of these notes by the hands redundant. Moreover, doubling the bass notes in the manual makes unnecessary work for the left hand, cluttering and complicating the fingering, and making legato difficult. When a stanza of the hymn is to be played without pedal, then, of course, the hands will play the bass part as well. It is acknowledged that for many who have played hymns for years without formal study, perhaps having learned to play them first on the piano, omitting the bass line from the left hand can be a most difficult challenge. But learning to do so is a task worth the effort, since, once achieved, it actually makes the hymn much easier to play.

Play the tenor line in the left hand; play the soprano line in the right hand. The alto line is normally divided between the right and left hands, depending on which is (1) nearer or (2) less busy at the moment. The treatment of repeated notes in hymns deserves some special attention. What to do with repeated notes varies with their

location in the music, the type of hymn, its tempo, the acoustics, the congregation, and so on. But, for the most part, the principle is much the same as that for the treatment of repeated notes in other organ literature. That is, when repetitions involve quarter notes and notes of lesser duration, the first note's value is halved, and a half-value rest is inserted between the notes. Longer notes preceding a repeated note are treated as though they are dotted-quarter notes.

First, to learn this principle thoroughly, apply it to every repeated note in all voices. This will produce a somewhat unmusical result in many hymns, but will help in the development of complete independence and coordination of fingers and feet. Whenever a note repeats, it is lifted, even when the repetition is in a different voice, unless the soprano melody is broken.

When the repeated-note principle has been mastered, exceptions may be made, and sometimes extensively, if the music's effect is thereby enhanced. For instance, in a hymn like "Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain," repeated notes involve all voices in the opening bar. To avoid choppiness, it might be best to tie some of the repeated notes in the lower voices. Leave the melody detached, however, so that the congregation can follow it easily. Similarly, ties are called for in the hymn "O Day of God, Draw Nigh" as regards the treatment of the soprano and alto in the first full measure. The soprano line must be kept intact and legato preserved. In any case, hymns that involve long notes in the bass line may benefit from having those notes broken up by the addition of rests. A rest at the end of a bar will create an accent on the downbeat of the next bar. Likewise, rests in other places may produce a syncopated effect useful in certain musical styles.

Registration for congregational hymn singing is basic. The heart of it is the principal chorus, that is, principals at 8', 4', and 2' pitches. On a gentle, devotional-type hymn, the 2' may be omitted, but the 4' must always be present to support the singing. In a more powerful or festive hymn, the mixture may be added to the chorus. When possible, utilize exposed pipework as the basis for your hymn registrations; unenclosed pipes provide more effective leadership by virtue of the immediacy and sense of presence they project. If the principal chorus seems thin or unsubstantial, feel free to warm the sound by the addition of flutes from the Great or the Swell, as long as clarity is not sacrificed. For final stanzas of big hymns, a clear reed (such as an oboe or trumpet) may be added, along with a light 16' manual stop. Register the pedal to balance the manual stops, and employ manual-to-pedal couplers as needed.

Avoid the use of celestes and tremolo in hymn playing; these tend to muddy the texture, as well as distort pitch and pulse. Exercise discretion regarding the swell pedal: generally, avoid its use for expressive purposes, but employ it occasionally to change the timbre of the ensemble (as when the Swell is opened to make the Swell reeds more prominent).

Tempo is one of the most critical elements of good hymn playing. No single tempo is right for every hymn or every situation, but tempos that are either too fast or too slow are to be avoided. A hymn that is rushed leaves the congregation breathless and prevents the message of its text from being grasped by the singers. And a tempo which is too slow will deflate the hymn, robbing it of meaning and of direction. A hymn's ideal tempo depends on many factors: the age and makeup of the congregation, the time of day, acoustical environment, the nature of the hymn itself,

its function in the service, the nature of the organ, the weather, and so on. But perhaps the most important consideration is the hymn. The hymn must be played at such a pace that the meaning and message of the poetry is delivered with maximum effectiveness. This means that the tempo should be slow enough for the words to be articulated and understood by the singers, yet fast enough to project direction, vitality, and continuity of thought.

Perhaps the best way to determine the ideal tempo of a hymn is to sing it yourself, first without accompaniment, and next, as you play. As you sing, try to keep the meaning of the words in the forefront of your mind: if you find this difficult at your chosen tempo, you may need to adjust the pace. At the same time, consider the musical characteristics of the hymn. What is it like? A march? A folksong? A lullaby? A dance? A prayer? Hymn tunes come from a broad variety of musical sources, and each type of music must be approached differently. In short, consider both text and tune as you plan your hymn tempos, and aim for a musically and poetically satisfying result.

An important question to consider is this: how long should the final note of each stanza be held, and how does one manage the space between stanzas so that each new verse gets off to a good start? There is no single answer to this question, but here are two principles that ought to guide one's thinking and practice: (1) the duration of the last note of a stanza is not as critical as the duration of the silence after it. A congregation will naturally breathe during the silence following the last note of a verse. If that silence is not long enough, the congregation will not be prepared to start the new verse cleanly. If the silence lasts too long, uncertainty and confusion will result. In either case, the singing will suffer. Generally speaking, the duration of

silence following the last note of each verse will equal one metrical pulse (i.e., a quarter note in 4/4 time, a half note in 2/2 time, etc.). This gives the congregation a chance to take a deep breath and also serves as a preparatory beat to the start of the new verse. This leads us to the second principle: (2) the space between verses should be perceived as metrical. In other words, the rhythmic pulse of the hymn should continue through the space between the stanzas. Normally, the final note of a verse is lengthened by a pulse or two (or three). This is then followed by a beat of silence, with the new verse starting strictly in time. So don't stop counting when you reach the end of each stanza! It is important to work out beforehand exactly how long you intend the final note to last, to be rhythmically precise in your execution, and to treat the endings of all stanzas, except perhaps the last, in exactly the same way.

CREATIVE HYMN PLAYING TECHNIQUES

There are many ways in which an organist can vary the accompaniment to a hymn tune, stanza by stanza. Since the Service Playing Exam requires some degree of contrast between the two stanzas of each hymn in items S-5 and S-9, it may prove helpful to enumerate some of these techniques.

But first, let it be said that there are two aspects of a hymn which should never be altered from stanza to stanza: a hymn's melody, for one, should not be tampered with. And, once a hymn has begun, its tempo should not be allowed to change from stanza to stanza. Practically all the other aspects of a hymn's performance at the organ can

be modified: registration, texture, phrasing, articulation, and harmonization are all features that may be altered for variety and to highlight the hymn's text.

REGISTRATION CHANGES

Perhaps the simplest way to achieve contrast is by changing the registration during the course of the hymn. It seems natural to want to add the Swell reeds for a bigger sound on stanza 2 of a hymn of praise like ABBOT'S LEIGH, "Lord, You Give the Great Commission." But don't fall into the trap of doing this automatically! Not every hymn has a second stanza that requires a reed chorus! In fact, the second stanza of a hymn like "Of the Father's Love Begotten" seems to require an even gentler registration than its first stanza. In choosing your registrations, therefore, as well as whatever other variation techniques you might employ, always consider the needs of the text first and foremost. It is the meaning and sense of the words which, ideally, should be illustrated by one's manner of playing.

PHRASING

The use of variety in one's approach to phrasing is a helpful way to clarify the poetic meaning of a hymn. Attention to the punctuation of a hymn's text will often reveal places where different phrasing is needed from stanza to stanza. (As an example, refer to the hymn "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life" and compare the difference in phrasing in the last line. The first stanza would need a phrase break at the comma in the second measure, while the second stanza would have no break at this measure.) When this is the case, the organist should phrase the music as it should be sung, that

is, the music should breathe when the text permits and should carry through when a breath is not called for.

ARTICULATION

Sometimes the meaning of a hymn stanza can be enhanced through a change of articulation. A more detached style yields a more animated result, while a more legato touch produces a gentler effect. Consider, for instance, the hymn, "People, Look East." A basically legato touch may be fine for stanza 1. The words of stanza 2, however, "Angels announce, with shouts of mirth..." seem to call for a more detached, repeated-note style to give a fanfare-like quality to the music in support of the text. Sometimes, good results can be obtained by a judicious use of simultaneous legato and non-legato touches in different voices for a phrase or two (usually the melody remains legato to be clearly heard).

TEXTURE

A simple way to effect a change of texture in a hymn is to play a stanza in full or in part, without pedals. This is perfectly acceptable, as long as the resulting lighter sound is congruent with the meaning of the text. (The Service Playing Exam requires at least one full stanza of each hymn in items S-5 and S-9 to be played with pedals.) Other textural variations are possible, however, depending on the musical needs of the text. Chords can be filled out with added notes for a weightier, more majestic effect on some hymns of praise. Or, for more intimate effects, the four-part SATB harmonization might be reduced to a manuals-only, three- or even two-voice texture

for part or all of a verse. Reducing the number of voices in this way is a useful technique, but one which should be prepared carefully, so that the essential harmonies remain clear and proper voice-leading is retained. A particularly dramatic effect can be obtained by presenting the opening notes of a big stanza in octaves, without harmony; this is a useful way to signal the start of an alternate harmonization.

SOLOING OUT THE MELODY

A tried-and-true method of emphasizing a hymn's melody is to solo it out on a separate manual. All that is needed is a strong solo stop or combination on one manual and softer accompaniment stops on a secondary manual. The pedal is given a soft 16' (& 8') line, with perhaps the softer manual coupled to the pedal. The right hand plays the melody on the solo manual, the left hand plays both alto and tenor voices in the accompaniment, with the bass assigned to the pedal. This type of treatment works best when the melody is fairly flowing, and the alto and tenor lines are manageable. The tune ROEDER, "God of the Sparrow," is an example of a hymn-tune which accommodates this technique successfully, while the wide spacing between the alto and tenor parts of ABBOT'S LEIGH makes application of this technique more difficult.

REHARMONIZATION

Finally, a hymn's harmonization itself may be altered. There are plenty of published alternate hymn harmonizations available, and any of these may be used to accompany

hymns' stanzas in items S-5 and S-9. Should you elect to use a published harmonization, however, you must check it carefully against the music in the Examination Hymn Booklet. Many hymn tunes exist with melodic and rhythmic variants, so make sure that your hymn tune is consistent from stanza to stanza. You might go about it:

1. Try playing all four voices of the hymn in the manuals and add a pedal point for all or part of a stanza. A pedal point is a sustained note in the bass, most often the tonic (do) or dominant (sol) note in the key. If tonic, it is frequently best to move to the dominant for the final V-I cadence. If dominant, it must also move to the tonic at the last chord. The dissonances created above a static bass line can either be beautiful or disconcerting; use your ear to judge when to move off the pedal point and be prepared to quit it completely when necessary.
2. Experiment with rearranging the voice parts. Sometimes, especially on hymn tunes with fairly stepwise movement and limited range, it is possible to create instant descants by rearranging the notes on the page. Try transposing the alto part up an octave so that it sits above the soprano. This produces a satisfactory effect in a hymn like "Lord, Enthroned in Heavenly Splendor." Another technique (not for the faint of heart!) is to switch the soprano and tenor parts, so that the melody is now in the tenor range, and the tenor part sits on top, transposed an octave higher. This technique requires considerable practice, but can produce attractive results, especially if the melody, now in the tenor range, is soloed out on a separate manual.

3. Try adding non-harmonic tones to the hymnal harmonization by filling in the thirds, that is, adding stepwise passing tones (usually eighth notes) in each voice wherever there is a leap of a melodic third. A close look at most harmonizations will reveal many places where this technique can be employed, though it is probably best used sparingly, if at all, on the melody line itself. Similarly, the addition of suspensions can be a useful technique in the crafting of reharmonizations.
4. Finally, if you wish to compose a completely new harmonization, it may be helpful to remember that in traditional triadic (three-note) harmony, if a melody note is not a non-harmonic tone of some sort (like a suspension, passing tone, etc.), it may be harmonized as the root, third, or fifth of a chord. To put this another way: a C in the melody may be thought of as the root of a C Major chord (or C Minor chord!), or it may be the third of an A Minor chord or the fifth of an F Major or F Minor chord. So even before introducing the possibility of using dominant 7th chords, chromatic harmony, or non-harmonic tones, the harmonic possibilities in each melody are endless. Not all these possibilities are useful or appropriate, but there is certainly enough to work with!

Another way to approach reharmonization is to consider the function of each chord within a key and to substitute secondary chords for primary ones. For instance, the ii chord substitutes nicely for the IV, and the vi chord fills in well for the tonic, especially where deceptive cadences are the result. Moreover, first-inversion chords function equally well as their root-position parents and often yield a smoother bass

line. In general, one should try to keep the bass and soprano lines moving in different directions as much as possible.

All of this is pretty technical, but the moral is this: don't be afraid to experiment a little and free yourself from the printed page. Try to use a variety of the techniques described above; the most interesting harmonizations do exactly that. Let your ear and your sense of musicianship guide you as you work to create something grammatically correct, musically satisfying, and stylistically consistent. Above all, the music you play should somehow enrich a hymn and its text and encourage people to sing. Once you are satisfied with your hymn tune harmonization, copy it out and play it for someone. Better yet, use it at church; if it's successful there, play it on the exam!

CHAPTER 5

PSALM PLAYING

(Item S-3)

Item S-3 on the Service Playing Exam allows the candidate to choose one of the psalms in various styles from the AGO Examination Hymn Booklet; of these, the candidate is to play the refrain and/or all four verses of its accompaniment as it would be performed in a service of worship. For satisfactory performance on the Service Playing Exam, a singer is required. Detailed guidelines for the preparation of these psalm accompaniments have already been published on the AGO website in the [Psalm Preparation Resource](#). We encourage candidates to refer to this resource in preparation for the exam.

CHAPTER 6

VOCAL SOLO & ANTHEM ACCOMPANIMENTS

(Items S-4 & S-6)

Organists are routinely confronted with accompaniments not written for the organ, and the idiomatic adaptation of these pieces is seldom easy. A thorough discussion of this topic cannot be attempted here; rather, a few general comments, with particular thought for the practical aspects of the exam, should guide prospective candidates as they accommodate their ideas to the resources at hand.

Approach the accompaniment as if it had been best written for the organ. Do not slavishly adhere to the somewhat narrow view that since the accompaniment was written for orchestra, an attempt must be made to replicate orchestral colors and sonorities. Ultimately, the accompaniment must sound convincingly organistic. If you consult a full score, do so only for guidance and not with a thought to converting orchestral trombones into Swell reeds, for instance. You are creating an arrangement of an arrangement. There is no need to feel strictly obligated to play every note exactly as it appears on the page. The editor has made various subjective decisions about what should be included and what could be omitted; within certain reasonable limits, you may do likewise in order to achieve a musical result.

Use upper work sparingly. Think of the orchestra (especially in the 18th century) almost as an 8' instrument. On most modern organs, there will rarely be a need for any stop above a 4' Principal. Mixtures and high reeds, never! (N.B. This is not a

universal comment!) Some upper work may be necessary on older instruments for the sake of clarity. Remember: octave doubling in an orchestral texture has an entirely different and far more subtle effect than on an organ; if you must use a 2' stop, it should be of small scale on a secondary manual.

Give careful thought to articulation. Overdoing legato is an all-too-common peculiarity of many organists, and it is anathema to effective accompaniment. Similarly, rapid scale-wise or arpeggiated passages must be played cleanly, taking special care to avoid sustaining broken chords except when this occurs in both hands. Violin articulation cannot be duplicated on the organ, but it can be imitated!

Be rhythmic! All singers, whether amateur or professional, depend on the accompanist to give support not only to intonation but also to rhythm. Nothing is more enervating than a lethargic accompaniment, mechanically played. (This is particularly crucial when the organist is also the director.) The most egregious single factor contributing to leaden rhythm is a heavy pedal played with too much legato. Keep the pedal line slightly detached to maintain a buoyant and well-defined pulse.

Remember to phrase! Stravinsky's apposite observation, "...the monster never breathes!" was directed at our instrument, but it clearly must be taken very much to heart by all organists. Think vocally. Strive to make the organ sing!

CHAPTER 7

SIGHT-READING

(Item S-8)

The sight-reading question follows the Offertory repertoire on the Service Playing Exam. It is the only item on the exam in which the candidate does not select the music or prepare it beforehand. As the exam requirements are made clear, a candidate's grade on this section of the exam will be based on their ability to maintain a steady tempo while performing notes and rhythms accurately. Shortly before the exam date, the exam's sight-reading passage is sent from AGO Headquarters to the local Chapter Dean or Examination Coordinator. The passage is not shown to the candidate until the moment of the exam itself, whereupon the candidate is permitted two minutes to scan the passage before playing it. The passage is printed on three staves, and typically includes some chromaticism, changes of texture, and a moderate degree of rhythmic complexity. The use of pedals is optional.

Sight-reading is a very important component of the work of a church musician. What follows are some suggested methods for improving sight-reading skills, as well as some considerations that may aid a candidate preparing for this portion of the exam. Also included is a sample sight-reading passage from an actual Service Playing Exam.

LEARNING TO SIGHT-READ

It has been said that sight-reading cannot be taught. And it is true, most good sight-readers would admit that they learned the skill as the need arose. Musicians who teach themselves most quickly to sight-read are those who are called to do it frequently, especially in performance situations. Any organist who serves a church or synagogue will recognize the truth of this and will confirm the value of being able to sight-read well. Here are some step-by-step guidelines to help give order and direction to your sight-reading practice.

1. Make sight-reading a part of your regular practice routine. Start with the hymnal. Choose a hymn with a sturdy tempo and four-part (SATB) chorale texture. (A hymn tune such as STUTTGART is a good place to begin.) At the outset, understand that in sight-reading, you cannot stop or slow down for any reason whatsoever.
2. Sight-reading must be performance-oriented from the start; if you permit yourself the luxuries of slowing down to accommodate difficult passages or backtracking to correct errors, you will not learn to sight-read effectively. If you make a mistake, keep going. If you make two or three mistakes, keep going. If it gets so bad that it comes completely apart, play only the melody until you can get back on track, but keep going. To help yourself keep going, pretend, as you practice, that you are playing the hymn for a large singing congregation. You dare not slow down (or break down) with a congregation following you!

3. Begin to play and KEEP GOING! Struggle, if necessary, through the first stanza, just as you would have to do with a live congregation if an unplanned hymn had been announced from the pulpit. At the end of stanza 1, go straight into stanza 2, then 3, 4, and so on. You will find that with each repetition, some little things will improve; a note missed in the second line will mend itself, an accidental missed note in the tenor will be corrected, and in some way, each play-through will affect some improvement, until you finally reach the end of the hymn. Now, and only now, do you dismiss your imaginary congregation.
4. Go back to the beginning of the hymn and try it once more, at a slow pace, noting and correcting any last things that never did go right during the sight-reading. Work out fingerings and pedalings in passages that eluded you through the play-throughs. Then, once more, play the hymn through at singing tempo, so it feels learned. By following this systematic approach on a daily basis, it is not unusual to become proficient at sight-reading hymns in a matter of weeks.

Since the sight-reading question on the Service Playing Exam resembles music that is more complex than simple congregational hymns, the next step is to move up to a higher level of difficulty. Work your way through the hymnal, and don't shy away from hymns in non-traditional styles or arrangements. Obtain a copy of Bach's 371 Chorale harmonizations and sight-read your way through these as some are quite involved and make for good practice.

The playing of trios can be quite challenging, of course, and even more so the sight-reading of trios. But, when you are ready (i.e., when you are comfortable

sight-reading hymns and Bach chorales), it is time to move on to some simpler trios. Whereas, when learning trios as organ literature, we usually practice each line separately, combining the parts gradually (hands together, RH and pedal, LH and pedal, and so on), when practicing sight-reading, it is essential to read and play everything together. The aim here is to comprehend and play all the parts simultaneously, with accuracy of notes and rhythms, at a steady tempo. This may prove to be a struggle at first, but it is well worth the effort.

Another idea is to look at anthems from your choir library and sight-read the accompaniments. Sight-read your way through a collection of 17th- and 18th-century chorale preludes, or through some toccatas and canzonas of Frescobaldi. Use music from your own collection which you haven't played yet; besides sharpening your sight-reading skills, you'll be acquainting yourself with the repertoire.

THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN SIGHT-READING

1. Carefully observe key and time signatures before beginning.
2. Set a tempo and hold to it strictly. On the Service Playing Exam, take note of the tempo indication and follow it.
3. Do not hesitate, stop, or slow down for any reason, no matter how strongly you are tempted: avoiding a mistake in this manner is tantamount to making one. Likewise, one must never stop making corrections: not only is it too late to fix an error once it is committed, but stopping serves only to draw attention to the problem.

SAMPLE SIGHT-READING

The following passages of music are actual sight-reading questions from the most recent Service Playing Exams. They are included here to give a general idea of the level of difficulty that may be encountered on the exam. While every exam is different, these examples can be considered representative in terms of their length, chromaticism, and overall rhythmic and textural complexity.

As was already mentioned, on the exam, a candidate is given two minutes to scan the sight-reading passage. During that time, the candidate should mentally go through the passage, taking note of spots which might prove troublesome. Attention should be given to accidentals, especially those repeated within a measure. Similarly, the candidate should be alert to potential pitfalls in the rhythm of the passage. For example, opening quarter-notes might easily be played incorrectly as eighths. Dotted rhythms are almost always a feature of sight-reading passages on the exam: these should be handled with precision. The key to playing rhythms accurately, here and everywhere, is simple: count carefully and steadily as you play.

Apart from their sight-reading practice habits in the weeks and months leading up to the exam, a candidate's chances of success on this portion of the Service Playing Exam depend largely on their ability to make efficient use of the two-minute interval before the playing of the passage. The paragraph above has pinpointed several specific musical features to which a candidate should be alert. Just as important, and perhaps more so, is the candidate's mental attitude during this portion of the exam. When first presented with the sight-reading passage, resist the urge to panic! Remain

calm and scan the music carefully. Remain confident in your ability to sight-read: if you have been diligent in your practice regimen, there will be nothing here that you cannot handle. When instructed by the proctor to begin playing, remain calm, careful, and confident.

In fact, that last sentence applies well to the entire Service Playing Exam. Prepare thoroughly, practice diligently, and approach the whole exam calmly, carefully, and confidently. Once again, congratulations on your interest in the AGO's certification program, and best wishes to you as you prepare to take the exam.

[2023-24 SPC Sight Reading](#)

[2024-25 SPC Sight Reading](#)

[2025-26 SPC Sight Reading](#)

RESOURCES

REPERTOIRE

BOOKS

Dart, Thurston. *The Interpretation of Music*. Harper and Row, 1954, rev. 1963.

Davis, Roger E. *The Organists' Manual*. W. W. Norton, 1985.

Donington, Robert. *Baroque Music: Style and Performance*. W. W. Norton, 1982.

Douglass, Fenner. *The Language of the Classical French Organ: A Musical Tradition Before 1800*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969.

Gleason, Harold. *Method of Organ Playing, Eighth Edition*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995.

Goode, Jack C. *Pipe Organ Registration*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1964. [Excellent, out of print; includes rare information on early twentieth-century American composers.]

Hilty, Everett J. *Principles of Organ Playing*. Pruett, 1971.[See especially Units IX and X.]

Hurford, Peter. *Making Music on the Organ*. Oxford University Press, 1988.

Leupold, Wayne. *First Organ Book*, Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc, Fourth Edition.

Marshall, Robert L. *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach: The Sources, the Style, The Significance*. Schirmer Books, 1989.

Ochse, Orpha. *Organists and Organ Playing in Nineteenth-Century France and Belgium*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, rev. 2000.

Ritchie, George H., and George B. Stauffer. *Organ Technique—Modern and Early*.
Oxford University Press, 2000. [Especially see Chapter 7, “Service Playing,” 345
ff. It also covers the basics of technique in all styles by era, including
late-twentieth-century ones.]

Soderlund, Sandra. *Organ Technique: A Historical Approach*. Hinshaw Music, 1980, 2nd
ed. 1988.

Thomas, Anne Marsden, and Frederick Stocken. *The New Oxford Organ Method*,
Oxford University Press, 2020.

Williams, Peter. *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach*. Cambridge University Press, 1980.

TAO ARTICLES

Hall, Jonathan B., FAGO, ChM. “Spotlight on Certification: Second Half Syndrome” *The American Organist*, vol. 53, no. 6, (June 2019), 50-51.

Harr, Sarah, FAGO. “Techniques for Effective Practice”, *The American Organist*, vol. 58, no. 10, (October 2024), 74-75.

TRANSPOSITION

TAO ARTICLES

Grinnell, Kenneth, FAGO, ChM. “Transposition: Not a Four-Letter Word,” *The American Organist*, vol. 42, no. 5 (May 2008), 82-83.

Hall, Jonathan B., FAGO, ChM. “Spotlight on Certification: Transposition Tests”, *The American Organist*, vol. 53, no.2, (February 2019), 51.

HYMN PLAYING

BOOKS

Anderson, Margaret S. *A Guide to Effective Hymn Playing*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1964.

Andrews, Mildred, and Pauline Riddle. *Church Organ Method*. New York: Carl Fischer, 1973.

Burkhardt, Michael. *Creative Hymn Playing: Improvisation, Exercises, and Repertoire*. St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, 2013.

Conway, Marmaduke P. *Church Organ Accompaniment*. New York: Macmillan, 1952.

Grace, Harvy. *The Complete Organist*. London: Richard Press, 1920.[See p. 94—concerning tempo and breathing space, as well as style of free harmonization.]

Heller, David. *Manual on Hymn Playing*. Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 1992.

Lovelace, Austin, and William Rice. *Music and Worship in the Church*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1976.

Lovelace, Austin. *The Organist and Hymn Playing*. New York: Abingdon Press., 1962.

Rotermund, Donald. *Off the Page*. St. Louis: MorningStar Music, 2007. *Off the Page Two*. 2011. *On or Off the Page*, 2013.

Walter, Samuel. *Basic Principles of Service-Playing*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1963.

TAO ARTICLES

Capon, Michael. "Varying Textures in Hymn Accompaniment at the Organ". *The American Organist*, vol. 55, no. 1 (January 2021), 66-69.

Grinnell, Kenneth, FAGO, ChM. "It Don't Mean a Thing if You Can't Make 'Em Sing'/Leading Hymn Singing from the Organ: A Practical Checklist." *The American Organist*, vol. 40, no. 4 (April 2006), 52, 54.

Harrison, David. "Off the Page: Letting Loose (a Little) in Hymn Playing", *The American Organist*, vol. 56, no. 4 (April 2022), 78-81.

VOCAL SOLO & ANTHEM ACCOMPANIMENTS

BOOKS

- Bach, C.P.E. *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*. New York:W. W. Norton, 1949.
- Buck, Dudley. *Choir Accompaniment*. Colfax: Wayne Leupold Editions.
- Conway, Marmaduke P. *Church Organ Accompaniment*. New York: Macmillan, 1952.
- Dickinson, Clarence. *The Technique and Art of Organ-Playing*. New York: H. W. Gray, 1922.
- Ellingford, Herbert. *The Art of Transcribing for the Organ*. Colfax: Wayne Leupold Editions.
- Gleason, Harold. *Method of Organ Playing, Eighth Edition*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995. [See Part Six, "Adapting Piano Accompaniments."]
- Hilty, Everett J. *Principles of Organ-Playing*. Boulder: Pruett Publishing Co., 1971. [P. 134 discusses the adaptation of pianistic styles to the organ.]
- Hurford, Peter. *Making Music on the Organ*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

SIGHT READING

BOOKS

Gleason, Harold. *Method of Organ-Playing*. 8th Edition. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1995. [Especially see p. 87.]

Johnson, David N. *Instruction Book for Beginning Organists*. Revised ed. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973. [Especially see p. 26.]

Sutton, Francis W. *Organ Tests for the ARCO*. London: Hinrichsen, 1963(C. F. Peters, Nos. H-350a and H-350b). 2 Vols. Helpful preface by Gordon Phillips. [It contains exercises in both organ-solo sight-reading and vocal-score reading (open score).]

TAO ARTICLES

Hall, Jonathan B., FAGO, ChM. “Ten Tips on Sight-Reading.” *The American Organists*, vol. 43, no. 3 (March 2009), 84-85.