

Study Guide for the **AGO Service Playing Test**

American Guild of Organists
Professional Certification Committee



American Guild of Organists
475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1260, New York, NY 10115
Phone: 212-870-2310 | Fax: 212-870-2163
Email: info@agohq.org | Web site: www.agohq.org

CONTENTS

Preface	1
Introduction	2
Chapter 1: Effective Practice	5
Chapter 2: Prepared Repertoire	11
Chapter 3: Hymn Transposition	22
Chapter 4: Hymn Playing	27
Chapter 5: Psalm Accompaniment	39
Chapter 6: Anthem Accompaniment	46
Chapter 7: Sight Reading	51
Appendix: Notes on the Recorded Hymns, Psalms, and Anthems	56
Acknowledgements	59

PREFACE

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

Your purchase of this Study Guide is proof of your interest in the Service Playing Test, and therefore of your interest in personal growth and professional development. While it is perhaps true that these things may be accomplished without the taking of examinations, it may also be true that this growth may remain largely unperceived by those who hear you regularly, just as the parent does not notice the steady growth of a child day by day. The successful completion of an examination and the resulting certificate is not only cause for personal satisfaction, but evidence of your personal and professional growth to colleagues, employers, and congregations.

All of the Guild’s certification examinations are demanding at their respective levels. A comment frequently heard from candidates goes something like this: “Even if I don’t pass the exam on the first try, I will have learned a great deal and increased my skills just by undertaking the challenge.” Depending on training and experience, many who take these examinations are successful on their first try; others may take longer. For the latter, it is important to remember that the primary goals of exam study and preparation are stimulation and self-improvement, not discouragement. While the earning of a Guild certificate is an appropriate reward, the real prize is becoming better at what you do, and therefore, because of the time and effort invested in the process, both successful and unsuccessful candidates alike are winners.

By preparing for the Service Playing Test, 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 for choosing to become a part of this worthy cause!

INTRODUCTION

I. ABOUT THE STUDY GUIDE

The Service Playing Test 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 Test is simple: at its own level it is just as demanding as the more difficult examinations are at their levels.

The first word of advice, therefore, is: do not underestimate the test. The Service Playing Test 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 word of advice is: Do not overestimate your own ability and preparedness as you approach the test. Certain skills and challenges which you will encounter on the test may not be part of your usual service-playing experience; your level of competence may be sufficient to elicit warm complements from your congregation but may fall short of equipping you adequately for the test.

This Study Guide is intended as an aid to your study and preparation, not a guarantee that you will successfully pass the test. 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 2009 revision of the Service Playing Test Study Guide was created to incorporate changes and repertoire additions to the test since 1998. Thus, this study guide includes material relative to the following test items: Organ Repertoire, Transposition, Hymn Playing, Psalm Accompaniment, and Sightreading. In some of these areas, it includes helpful articles which have appeared in *The American Organist*, and offers suggestions for further study. Recorded performances of representative selections from the test repertoire are recorded on the CD that accompanies this booklet. The current Study Guide is based on the work of Lester H. Groom, AAGO, the author of the first Service Playing Test Study Guide in 1985. Much of his 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 Kevin Walters, FAGO, Paul Skevington, and Alan Hommerding for their contributions, and to David Shuler, FAGO, former Director of the Professional Certification Committee, whose fine organ-playing

is heard on the recording. Joyce Shupe Kull, FAGO, ChM, Elaine Dykstra, CAGO, and Jonathan B. Hall, FAGO, ChM, have recorded the newer repertoire, anthems, and hymn selections.

II. ABOUT THE TEST

Unlike all other AGO certification examinations, whose dates are fixed, the Service Playing Test may be taken at any time between October 1 and March 31, as long as application has been made at least one month in advance of the chosen test date.

Application forms and the test Manual of Procedure may be obtained from National Headquarters after all membership dues have been paid.

The Service Playing Test may be taken at any chapter. No local examiners are involved. The test is proctored by a duly appointed chapter member, recorded on audio tape or CD and forwarded to AGO Headquarters for grading by national examiners.

Each examiner is familiar with this Study Guide. The performer is thus assured that each examiner listens not necessarily for his or her 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.

The test proceeds item by item according to the requirements, with the proctor announcing each section on the recording and serving as page-turner if one is desired.

III. 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 test, 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 test easily, it would not represent such a significant accomplishment. In order for the test to have meaning and stature, it is designed to make you reach a bit. Do not approach it lightly!

The possibility that test requirements might change from year to year makes it unwise to begin preparing during one academic year for a test during the following year. However, if study is begun in the late summer, a test date early the next spring, within the same academic year, would be extremely reasonable.

While you may arrange to take the Service Playing Test at an organ with which you are familiar, the Manual of Procedure suggests that the test be given on a pipe organ, for the sake of authenticity in the performance of the literature. Thus, if you normally play an electronic instrument, it would be best to schedule the test on a nearby pipe organ, if one is available. And for best results, you should plan to schedule a considerable amount of practice time on the test instrument, taking into account the following considerations:

1. Keyboard touch (particularly if the test 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, 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 acoustical environments call for adjustments in tempo, touch, and articulation.

IV. 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 him- or herself. 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 first 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.

I. GENERAL IDEAS

1. Practice regularly. A smaller amount of practice time every day is preferable to large bursts of practice two or three times a week, or worse, at irregular intervals. 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. After an interval of two or three days, it may have to be relearned entirely. So for best results, practice every day, and even at the same time of day, 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 pad of paper 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 the pad, the mind is once more free to concentrate. If you are practicing at home, turn on the answering machine and ignore the telephone; if practicing at church, arrange to have the secretary take messages for you rather than disturb you at the console.

4. In the latter stages of preparation, practice with a page-turner, or, better yet, with several different page-turners. 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 do.

5. Record a practice session. Two reasons: (1) It is amazing how much distraction can be generated just by the knowledge that a tape 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 a tape 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. And identifying one's errors is the first step in correcting them. The tape recorder is a valuable tool of our trade.

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

II. ELEMENTS OF PRACTICE

1. 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 an adventure in practical, applied psychology, particularly in the matters of forming habits, making corrections, and in the use of 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 so many factors which 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 habit, 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 cure is formulated.

The Subconscious Mind: The subconscious can be made to play an important part in the learning process, and moreover, can be put to use during 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 work at it continues 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 which 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!

2. 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, if not even by congregations! On the other hand, the good organist is characterized by meticulous rhythm, note-accuracy, and good manual and pedal technique. 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 not something simply to be desired, but 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!)

3. 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 unreality of CDs and other recorded performances: no matter how flawless the rendition, no matter how artistic the interpretation, the “canned” performance is always the same—a human impossibility!

Registration: Registrations 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 TESTS 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, 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.

4. Organization: Each aspect of the examination should be a part of every week's practice routine. Work out a weekly schedule, including test 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 which 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.

III. 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 later be gradually increased. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to quick learning is fast playing in the early stages.

- 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 indicated markings, white out the originals and pencil in the changes—we must use what we see and see what we use. If no fin-

gerings 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.
- Small Sections. Do not practice an entire piece straight through; frequent repetition of one small section at a time results in faster learning overall.
- Solving Coordination Problems. When the mind is unable to cope with three or four simultaneous difficulties, it is usually best to break up the music into smaller component problems. Often the difficulty is one of coordination between left hand and pedal. Try left hand alone, pedal alone, then the two 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 pedal, or all together very slowly. The important thing here is to isolate the difficulties and deal with them one by one.
- Attitude Regarding 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 which 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 a 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 test-time.
- 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.
- 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.

