

100 Strategies for Successful AGO Certification

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General Strategies:

Getting Organized Start early; start in July!

1. Obtain the AGO Professional Certification Requirements, published in the July TAO and on the AGO website. Read them thoroughly with attention to the deadlines, fees and other information.
2. Order the repertoire for your exam. Read your exam requirements. Begin work on the repertoire as soon as you obtain it.
3. Explore the growing selection of online educational resources on the AGO website. **All the certification study materials including past exams and solutions, study guides, and other items can now be downloaded free of charge!**
4. Monitor the AGO web site and later TAO issues for exam updates.
5. Find suitable materials and begin daily practice on applicable skills, such as transposition, harmonization, sight-reading.
6. Use organizational aids and calendars, such as iCAL (MAC) or daily/weekly/monthly charts.
7. Find a good teacher if at all possible and/or a mentor, a certificated AGO member.
8. Enlist a study buddy. Meet weekly and hold each other accountable for assignments.
9. Help to form a class for your exam (the inspiring story of the Fort Worth Chapter SPC class.
10. Develop and maintain a file of motivational material. How does my project advance the purposes of the AGO? How will this certificate help me personally, professionally? How might I use each specific skill tested in service playing in creative work? Other sources of motivational materials include the many articles that appear in TAO, such as “Why I chose to certify.” Meg Smith. Sept. ’05 TAO.
11. Begin a fitness program, for instance, walking; upgrade nutrition; begin strength training and/or stretching exercises. Choose something you like.
12. Obtain and study the manuals of procedure; what does each person: coordinator, proctor, candidate, do?
13. Study the score sheets for your exam. What does “imagination and musicality” mean? Go on a “point hunt.”
14. Acquire good equipment: buy new organ shoes, get a good metronome, recording equipment (recording equipment does not need to be expensive for evaluating your performance).
15. Record your exam many times, starting when it is not ready. Listen with the scores in front of you. Mark the things you hear (personal lesson). Sing and conduct with your recording. Recording tells you exactly what the examiners will hear.

*“O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.” Robert Burns (1759-1796)*

16. Play the exam for others, on several different organs if possible.
17. Take one exam from a previous year; take it apart thoroughly and understand the level of each question. Save the rest of your exams for mock tests, first with no time limit, then the last two within the specified time allotted.
18. After your successful completion of the certificate, publicize your achievement, explain the significance of your certificate to your employer, help to promote the exams, encourage others to take them, organize study groups and classes, proctor exams, write articles for your chapter newsletter or TAO. Mentor certification candidates.
19. Continue to practice and upgrade your skills.
20. Start on the next exam.
21. Enjoy your achievement forever!

Skills Common to Several Exams:

These skills are central to our job of playing services, and they sometimes are not as well prepared as the exam repertoire pieces. Make a special effort to start early on skills and persevere until you obtain mastery a little above the required level.

Sight-reading: SPC, CAGO, AAGO, FAGO

Good sight-readers are made not born. Believe that! I have seen astonishing progress in candidates' abilities after a year of progressive exercises in sight-reading.

22. Study previous sight-reading tests for your exam. Become thoroughly familiar with the level expected of candidates. Actually practice the examples after using them as test samples. This gives good information and practice at the proper level.
23. Obtain resources at the correct level. For instance, the SPC uses two staves. Sources include: manuals only pieces from organ methods such as Gleason or Ritchie/Stauffer, English organ music for manuals alone, hymns played on manuals alone, fughetts on two staves such as those found in "*80 Chorale Preludes*." The CAGO sight-reading test uses three staves. Resources might include exercises for manuals and pedals from the above and other organ texts, hymns and easy chorales from Bach's "371" or *The Church Organist's Golden Treasury*, trios and fugal style books by Hudson, Trevor, Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*, examples from your organ books, borrowed organ music, the Rheinberger Trios, his *Twelve Fughettas*, Op. 123a, Albrechtsberger, *Twelve Trios*, slow movements from Bach's Trio Sonatas. Be sure to practice difficult examples, and include contemporary styles (Alain. *Deux Chorals*, Langlais *Organbook*).
AAGO: practice anthems in open score, practice the Duruflé *Requiem* choral part.
FAGO: Go through all of the Bach Trio Sonatas for coordination and contrapuntal proficiency. Read complex scores such as those found in Reger. Go through much of your organ literature and borrowed scores.
24. Accompany an ensemble, a singer or play chamber music.
25. Do a two-minute sight-reading drill every day at the beginning of your practice time.

(60 second scan, play, evaluate, play again if time allows.)

26. For the test itself, try some of the following top ten suggestions.

TOP TEN TIPS ON SUCCESSFUL SIGHTREADING FOR ORGANISTS

10. Decide that you are going to become an excellent sight-reader. They are MADE not BORN.

9. Give yourself a two-minute test every practice session. Use 60 seconds to scan a short passage, using some of the techniques below.

8. Before you start...determine where you are. Begin at the far left of the staff: are the clefs normal, or are they all bass staves, or two trebles and one bass? What is the key? Play the scale and cadence. What is the time signature? What tempo indications are given?

7. Find the measure with the most activity (notes, rhythm, shortest note values). Decide how you are going to deal with those elements. Be able to count every beat, starting at the beginning, with the smallest note value.

6. Don't have an accident(al)! Note where there are accidentals at the beginning of the measure; follow through to the end of the measure...does the note recur? Get competent at this! Check leger lines; find a method for reading at least three lines above or below each staff. Note repeated notes; how are they to be treated? What about overlapping, notes? Rests?

5. Prepare the pedal line (if applicable); position your feet for the first entry. (Except for SPC Test, almost always try to read three staves.)

4. Does the passage contain articulation marks or a word indicating articulation such as *leggiero*? Learn to immediately get a concept of phrase and form in order to achieve coherent and musical results the first time you play a passage.

3. Devise a suitable registration. Study the style and texture (trio, melody and accompaniment, etc.) for ideas on registration. Have a few simple registrations for different textures in mind.

2. RELAX! Play at least slightly slower than performance speed; drop a note if you think you are going to miss it; let your eye go to the busiest or most important part. KEEP GOING!

1. Finally, get yourself a church job, and you'll have so much music to play, that you'll soon be sight-reading all the time (just kidding)!

Hymn-Playing: SPC, CAGO, AAGO, ChM

As you study, be aware that in the AAGO, FAGO, and ChM exams, the repertoire and anthems may be performed/rehearsed in any order; the order of performance of the SPC Test is now in service order.

27. Hymns are “job one” for church musicians. (Ken Grinnell) Sing with your playing of hymns and BREATHE!
28. Write in rests for breathing (often a quarter, or the appropriate rest, at the end of a line, stealing that much from the note value, not adding any time.)
29. Think deeply about the hymn texts and interpret them through your registration and style of playing (for example, majestic or prayerful).
30. Choose an appropriate tempo for each hymn and introduce it (if required) in the same tempo!
31. Keep hymn registrations clear and simple. For test purposes, do not change registrations in the middle of a verse (this should be rarely if ever practiced).
32. Be sure to repeat repeated notes in the melodic line.
33. Follow sensible practices regarding tying in hymns with slow harmonic rhythm, avoiding both choppiness and muddy playing.
34. Breathe before starting the next stanza.
35. Do not *ritard* at the end of every verse. Make it *poco rit.* at the end of the hymn!
36. Play with sensitivity, energy and joy! Facilitate the singing, and the congregation will follow your leadership.
37. Record your hymn playing and sing with it. How do your tempos sound? Can you breathe? Ask your buddy to sing with your hymn playing and listen to his/her helpful comments. Then exchange places with your partner.

Hymn Playing Demonstration: CAGO – AAGO level

Transposition: SPC, CAGO, AAGO, FAGO

38. Attend the frequent workshops offered at AGO National or Regional Conventions.
39. See Ken Grinnell’s May 2008 TAO article (posted on the AGO website).
40. See Dean Billmeyer’s handout “On Modulation.” (posted on the AGO website).
41. Start early, be consistent, and practice long for this skill. SPC Test candidates can actually practice all four of their required transpositions ahead of time. For the CAGO, start with hymns and progress to Bach Chorales. For CAGO, AAGO and FAGO, make use of the examples in old exams as well as the Bach Chorales and other material. Transpose whenever possible in services and in accompanying soloists.
42. Start with one or two voices if necessary; play slowly and work up to four parts and a reasonable exam tempo.
43. Don’t have an accident(al)! Learn to deal with each accidental in the required keys.
44. Always keep in mind the interval of transposition (e.g., up a whole step) and you will never get completely lost.
45. Read the pertinent TAO articles in the AGO booklet, “Preparing for AGO Exams,” now available online. **Above all, play the tests in the keys specified!**

Strategies for Specific Exams:

Service Playing Certificate Test

Put into practice all of the general suggestions above, especially as applied to specific requirements for the SPC Test. Play accurately, rhythmically and expressively.

Know the grading sheet very well.

46. Spend at least as much time on the skills and accompaniments as you spend on the required repertoire.
47. Joint NPM/AGO Certification Candidates, be aware of the specific NPM repertoire, liturgical and psalm requirements.
48. (S3.) Apply as many of the hymn suggestions given above as possible.
48. (S5.) If you do not regularly accompany a choir, try to arrange to practice your chosen anthems with a choir, or at least with a friendly choral director.
49. (S5.) Count short rests in the accompaniments. For longer breaks candidates are usually instructed to either play the choral parts or make a short pause and resume the accompaniment part in tempo. Know your options for rests. Be accurate on short rests. That includes the release as the rest begins.
51. (S5.) Be sensitive to the balance of choir and accompaniment in your registrations. Keep the registrations simple and clear, with as few changes as possible.
52. (S5.) Observe articulation marks such as slurs, accents, staccato marks. Execute clean changes of manual. Be sure all attacks and releases (manuals and pedals) are precisely together. Maintain tempo consistently. Shape phrases musically always.
53. (S4.) Play the psalm correctly, observing the requirements of each psalm carefully, with or without a singer.

Colleague

Advancing levels here include, for example, more difficult repertoire, the addition of a solo accompaniment, two hymns (or the NPM Liturgical piece and one hymn), plus keyboard skills to be prepared in a quiet room on a piano for 20 minutes, and then played at the organ with a 60-second scan for each skill, including sight-reading, harmonization, chosen from three possible styles, transposition and an improvisation selected from three options. The CAGO can be taken in two sections. (Please see the exact requirements in the July TAO.)

54. **Be informed as to when the CAGO repertoire changes!** The CAGO repertoire is on a two-year cycle beginning in even numbered years. Contact the AGO Certification Administrator, if you are in doubt about the current repertoire, exams@agohq.org.
55. See the SPC Test suggestions for accompaniments.
56. (C4.) Hymns: requires an introduction and two stanzas, played “as though leading a large, enthusiastic congregation.” The introduction may be original or may be selected from published repertoire.” Read ALL of the hymn specifications carefully!

57. (C6.) Harmonization requires knowledge of keys, cadences, chord progressions, voice leading and some chromatic harmony. Evaluate your level and seek a teacher, class or a keyboard text as indicated. Old exams are very helpful in preparing the harmonization question. If choosing the **a.** (hymn tune) option, practice reharmonizing hymns for services. Writing them out, at least at first, is a good idea.
58. (C8.) Improvisation. (Please see # 56.) There are many good TAO articles on improvisation in the AGO Booklet, "Preparing for AGO Exams." In addition, TAO has been running articles since 2001 on improvisation called, "Learn to Improvise in Fifteen Minutes a Day." These are short, useful tips. It is hoped that these articles may be compiled in a booklet as well. From the AGO Bibliography, the Michele Johns book on *Hymn Improvisation* is particularly useful.
59. (C8c.) Phil Gehring's article, "The Modulating Bridge," from the May 2005 TAO and revised in 2013 is now available online. It is also quite useful.
60. (C8c.) It is helpful, when candidates first begin to work with hymn bridges, to write out their examples, including the modulation plan. Spend as much time as necessary while learning the method. Work out many of them from old CAGO exams. Always have a plan for hymn bridges, and move forward with harmonic and rhythmic purpose.
61. Record your repertoire, accompaniments and hymns often. Play for others and play the exam on different organs.
62. Take at least three mock exams in which you work out the examples within the 20 minutes allowed and then play and record the entire exam at the console, preferably using the announcer's format in the Manual of Procedure. It is good to have a teacher or someone knowledgeable about the exam standards score the exams. Ask them to grade as rigorously as possible.

Choir Master

This is a highly specialized certificate! More people should prepare for the Choir Master exam, since so many organists/accompanists are pressed into service as regular or substitute choir directors, either for children or adult choirs. The skills tested in the Choir Master exam are extremely useful. Allow plenty of time to prepare for this exam!

63. Find a good voice teacher, preferably one trained in choral conducting. Work with the teacher over a full year or more, emphasizing vocal development, diction, and as many of the choral skills emphasized in Ch 1 as possible.
64. Videotape a rehearsal of the test anthems with a quartet, at least twice if possible, and critique your conducting techniques thoroughly.
65. Attend as many live choral performances as possible and sit where you can watch the conductor. Better yet, sing in a good choir under a master choral conductor. Listen to many recordings of excellent choral groups
66. Write a detailed plan for your rehearsal with each anthem and commit it to memory, marking the scores precisely. Practice starting at various spots.
67. Ask for an accompanist in order to concentrate on your rehearsal of the singers and on your conducting.
68. Play through the entire AGO Revised Examination Hymn Booklet in preparation for your keyboard test. Record several of the hymns and grade

- your hymn playing techniques (see hymn section above).
69. Practice cadences in every key. Study harmonization techniques from a keyboard harmony book if necessary.
 70. Practice all of the online AGO Ear Tests for the Choir Master Exam. Sing intervals every day. Either have a buddy play additional Choir Master Ear Tests from more recent exams or get someone to record them for you according to AGO specifications.
 71. Section 2 — Paperwork Tests
Use texts from your music library and identify texts needed from the AGO Bibliography for the various sections of this test.
Choose one good basic text to master in each area you need to study or review, and read further as necessary in other sources. Companions to denominational hymnals, such as *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, contain much valuable information. Contemporary Hymn Supplements for at least one major denomination are useful resources. Explore the AGO Resources page in TAO for choral techniques and recordings.
 72. (Ch 9.) Choral Repertoire: in addition to reviewing at least one major choral literature text, the candidate should study the work lists of at least two dozen major choral composers in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 2nd Edition*. Listen to as many great choral works, extended as well as shorter works, as possible. Read choral journals and articles on choral singing.
 73. Old Choir Master exams are great sources of knowledge about the short answer questions. They can help reveal weak areas and save time by indicating what the candidate does not need to review in great detail.
 74. Plan to work out Section 2 at least twice within the time limit.

Associate

75. Choose your repertoire group early and start work as soon as possible.
76. Find a good organ teacher with which to prepare the repertoire and keyboard skills.
77. (A2.) Please see number 23: Sight-read anthems in open score. Try the Duruflé *Requiem* choral part and other major works in open score. Couple manual to pedal with no pedal stops in case you need to pick up a note or passage with a wide range. Be alert for crossing of parts.
78. (A4.) Know the figures thoroughly. Practice old exams and work with at least one figured bass text.
79. (A5.) Spend plenty of time on harmonization. Practice harmonizing hymn tunes. Try to work out at least a couple of dozen examples, including those from old AAGO exams. Review rules for doubling of voices if necessary, especially for adjacent 6th chords. Remember that contrary motion is useful in avoiding parallels. Be sure your cadences are strong. Expect some simple chromaticism, such as secondary dominants.
80. (A6.) Creativity and technique at a higher level than the CAGO is expected in the Associateship hymn playing.
81. (A7.) Spend a year working with the three options for improvisation, but start to specialize in one option as the test date nears. Record your improvisation efforts many times.

82. (A8.) Analysis: Old exams are particularly useful in preparing the analysis question. Set up a clear system for writing your measure by measure analysis as well as the charts of the form.
83. (A9.) Fugue: Learn to write a tonal fugal answer. Refer to Walter Hilse's two recent articles on fugue (TAO April 2006 and March 2008) for practical suggestions on the Fugue question. These articles are available online.
84. (A10.) Use the online AAGO Ear Tests. Be sure and get someone to play other examples for you. As suggested earlier, sing intervals every day. Candidates tend to lose their way when interval recognition is not secure.
85. (A10.) In dictation, immediately determine how many measures are in the example. Beat the quarter note (or dotted quarter in compound meter), note the accent, and write the bar line. Practice several examples simply working out how many measures are given. Work some examples with rhythms only. Try some melodic lines very slowly and perfect interval recognition. When the tonic chord is given, recognize the root, 3rd and 5th. Quietly hum the triad. Gradually work up to speed on AAGO level examples.
86. (A11.) Composition. Study the given example. What is its style and texture? What does that suggest about the continuation? Devise a clear harmonic plan. Decide what contrast might be needed. End well!
87. (A12.) Questions. This section seems to cause more anxiety than most. The candidate has enough choices among the questions that failing this section is not likely, given some basic preparation in the areas listed in the exam requirements. The candidate who has had music history course work and some background in the study of organ design might decide to review contemporary musical trends and liturgy, with a short review also of organ and choral literature. A useful help is to look through an outline of music history such as the Wold and Cykler text, in order to determine weaknesses that might indicate further reading needs. Again, use old AAGO exams in order to test one's knowledge in the areas covered.

Fellow

The FAGO implies a continuation of skills learned previously, with several added creative aspects, such as a more lengthy improvisation and composing in several styles, as well as scoring for orchestra.

Section 1—Tests at the Organ

88. F1. The repertoire is at a high level of difficulty. Give it plenty of time to develop.
89. The keyboard tests also can require long preparation periods, depending on the candidate's starting level. F2. Sight-reading: see # 23.
90. (F3.) Sight-reading on four staves in c clefs and bass clef. In the past Bach's *Art of Fugue* was used as the source of this example. Now it will be newly composed.
91. (F4.) Adaptation of orchestral reduction for the organ. In this question the candidate should not try to get everything in, but provide a reasonable simplified rendition that is much more idiomatic to the organ.
92. (F6.) Improvisation in ternary form. The Gerre Hancock text, "*Improvising: How to Master the Art*" provides a clear path to mastery of this question.

93. (F7.) 16th-Century Counterpoint. Most candidates understand the basic rules of the style. Problems tend to arise in the recognition of opportunities for imitation, in writing examples of the treatment of dissonance and in creating a strong ending cadence. Sometimes there are difficulties in text underlay. Of course, not all candidates experience every problem.
94. (F8.) Fugue. Please refer to # 83. The Walter Hilse articles can provide much insight. This is often a problem area. The candidate should work out plenty of examples and check them with the solutions booklets. Study and review subject and countersubject writing as needed.
95. (F9.) Essay. It is now possible to study and write about a subject in more depth since the topic is announced a year in advance. Most candidates are therefore preparing very thoroughly for this question.
96. (F10.) Ear Tests. Please see # 84 and # 85. Use the online AGO FAGO Ear Tests for immediate review. If candidates do not have a method for determining the number of measures, for writing the rhythms and entering the various parts (2 or 4) in a certain order, a system should be acquired quickly. Do work with a partner or use recorded examples from old FAGO exams. A comprehensive text such as *Listen and Sing* by Damschroder that begins with the basics can help fill in the gaps as needed.
97. (F11.) Orchestration. The instrumentation aspects of orchestration are relatively straightforward. Candidates with a background in arranging for orchestra have an advantage here. A systematic approach to review and mastery of the range and capability of instruments and the historical stylistic use of the orchestra is indicated.
98. (F12.) Choral Composition. This is, for some candidates, a very pleasant part of the FAGO exam, and it reminds one just how creative the FAGO exam really is. Set texts over a lengthy period. Take special note of effective choral compositions and the methods of fine choral composers.

All candidates

99. Take pride in your accomplishments! You have furthered the mission of the AGO “to promote the organ...and to encourage excellence in the performance of organ and choral music...”
100. Further, you have facilitated the first three of the four purposes of the AGO:
 1. To advance the cause of organ and choral music...
 2. To improve the proficiency of organists and choral conductors.
 3. To evaluate, by examination, attainments in organ playing, choral techniques, conducting...and to grant certificates to those who pass such examinations...

The joy of music is to feel for a moment that our spirits will live forever.

Music has the power to excite and inspire. In fact, music is a wondrous gift that helps us to know deep within our souls the meaning of eternal life.

Most of life is a mystery. Our innermost selves ... our emotions, our instincts, our intuitions ... operate deep beneath the surface of our everyday awareness. But, just as our minds need to be fed in order to grow, so do these other faculties.

Music stirs something within our hearts that reaches far beyond the limitations of our ordinary experience. The true power of music is that it lets us feel for a brief moment that our spirits are truly infinite.

From St. Bartholomew Bulletin Board, New York City