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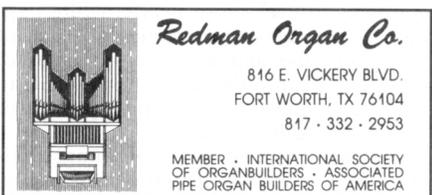
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TEN TIPS ON SIGHT-READING

Jonathan B. Hall, FAGO

Every Guild examination includes at least one sight-reading test. These are summarized below:

- Service Playing:* a passage on two staves
- Colleague:* a passage on three staves
- Associate:* a longer passage in open score, in G and F clefs (that is, in the manner of an open choral score)
- Fellow:* an organ work of two to three pages, and a passage in open score in C and F clefs (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass; in the manner of a Bach chorale from one of the Dover cantata scores)
- Choir Master:* a four-part hymn setting

Obviously, the Choir Master (ChM) certification primarily focuses on choral directing skills, so its sight-reading component is designed to test secure keyboard literacy. But the progression in difficulty from the SPC through the FAGO is easy to trace. A Fellow is expected to be able to perform true feats of sight-reading—well in excess of any university test of keyboard skills. The other tests are organized to provide a logical, seamless progression in skill-building.

How best to prepare? I don't believe that a "good night's sleep" is all you need. You can most definitely improve your sight-reading skills. They may seem like a mysterious set of gifts, but they are really a skill-set, and skills can be sharpened. Here are ten tips.

1. Know thine enemy! The sight-reading tests, other than that for the ChM, are more difficult than, say, the hymn tune "Nicaea." Expect counterpoint, varied texture, and harmonic twists and turns.
2. Don't outfox the American Guild of Organists! The sight-reading tests are not "gotcha" exercises in the esoteric. They are based on straightforward harmonic and musical practice. Don't think too deeply and be led into errors of cleverness. Don't expect tone rows, archaic modal practice, illegal or immoral intervals, or oh-so-trickiness. Expect a bona fide test of solid musicianship. Prepare conservatively and draw on the Common Practice. The sight-reading examples are not perverse. They are intended to reflect real-world values. Practice accord-

ingly: feet on the pedals, hands on the keys, eyes on the music, mind on the task.

3. Study with the experts—at home! The Guild offers you great resources via its online store. You might order "Service Playing Sight-Reading Examples" for a start. (You can get a complete "Service Playing Preparation Packet" if you like.) Many other training materials are available as CDs. Also, you can order past exam papers. Order a bunch of these—they are not expensive.

At first, you might practice sight-reading at your own pace, as slowly as you need to, stopping and starting, and retracing your steps as you need to. But as soon as you can, replicate the test environment. If a friend isn't available to "proctor," put yourself through your own paces: look at the sight-reading example for 60 seconds, then have at it. To supplement the Guild examples, try sight-reading from your church's choral library, or from an unfamiliar book of piano pieces. Don't go for a Rachmaninoff concerto, a MacDowell parlor piece or other easy-to-intermediate piano repertoire will serve you far better.

4. Don't underestimate simplicity. A "low-impact" exercise can build real muscle over time, and a musical brain is quite similar. Don't launch into something that is dauntingly difficult; the result might well be discouragement. Never fear the simplest of exercises. Personally, I enjoy daily re-grounding myself in basic finger exercises, triads, and scales. The same approach in sight-reading—slow, steady, simple, increasing gradually and naturally—will work better than a musical charge up San Juan Hill. If you use a metronome, use it gently. Let the tempo catch up to you.

5. Be a musician! When confronted with a new piece, and asked to "sight-read" it, use your *sight*, and *read!* What is the time signature? What is the key signature? Does the piece begin with an upbeat, a downbeat, a rest? Can you entrain the rhythm? Say to yourself: "This piece is in D minor, signature of one flat. Time signature is 4/4. The first measure contains a rest, half-note, and quarter-note, to be played *rest, two, three, four* . . ." Conduct if you need to. Count under your breath. Sub-divide. At Indiana University, we established the key thus:



one three five four three two one sev' one five one.

In other words, ground yourself in the key. Many disasters can be avoided by simply being certain of the signature!

6. Use your 60 seconds efficiently! Review the points in the previous paragraph. Check the other major points as well. Is there imitation? Modulation? A wide stretch? A "crunch"? What is that harmony in measure 3? A German sixth? A Neapolitan? Think analytically. On a

performance level, do you want silent pedal here or there? Do you feel comfortable using pedal throughout? And for Pete's sake, don't freeze up! We're all friends. *You can do this.*

7. Choose a simple, clear registration. An 8' flute and 4' principal, coupled to a modest 16' pedal, or with a clear independent pedal of 16' and 8', might be your best choice. For the SPC, consider a silent pedal—manual

coupled, no pedal stops—for the odd stretch. Clarity counts. This is not the time for either brilliance or impressionism. And though it's not happened yet in my experience, I wouldn't solo out the soprano line!

8. Choose a conservative but steady tempo—you will be expected to maintain it. If you practice with a metronome, aim for quarter note = 60 to 72. Slower is acceptable; faster is optional.

9. For AAGO and FAGO open-score questions: prepare the AAGO by reading open-score choral repertoire. For me, regular half-hour to hour sessions of reading through common choral octavos brought me to a high comfort level in not too much time. If you prefer, read one a day, slowly, during your regular practice. To approach it another way, you could copy out familiar hymns and short organ pieces into open score, and review them in that new format. The point is to build both facility and familiarity over time.

For the C clefs, I found it helpful to work with each clef separately, then combine them. The book, *Preparatory Exercises in Score Reading* (Howard Ferguson et al., Oxford University), was a huge help. I transcribed a few common hymns into C clefs, open-score. Also, the Dover edition, *J.S. Bach: Eleven Great Cantatas*, holds ample material, including a good number of open-score chorales. Do not expect these to yield easily! It is a peculiar mental agony to re-configure such a basic thing as clef space. You will, as Robert Frost says, "have your native simile jarred." ("The Door in the Dark," *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975], p. 265). But the reward will be great. It is, after all, largely the appearance of these low-cost Dover reprints that makes the C clef so important once again. Notice, too, how that wonderful, inexpensive Bach organ CD-ROM (available through the OHS Web site) uses C clef so often! You'll be well served by the knowledge you acquire.

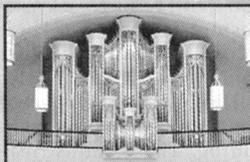
I went so far as to take my *Liber Usualis* to the organ on Sunday morning and read plainchants from it, accompanying them in simple modal harmony, on two manuals. There is an old book you might search out: *The Modal Accompaniment of Plain Chant with Exercises* by Edwin Evans, FRCO. This book provides examples of chant accompaniment with the right hand in four-line staff and movable Do clef, and the left hand in modern bass clef. It's not quite what the Guild ordered, but a mighty good way to stretch the brain! (It won't hurt your ChM plainchant preparations one bit, either.)

10. *Relax!* Trust your colleagues. We support you, we want you to succeed. There is no hazing involved. No one wins at the expense of others. All who meet the stated standard receive the promised honor. The exams do not replicate academic programs, and indeed uphold elements of classic organist training we are well advised to preserve. They will challenge you, and they will pay you rich dividends. This is a good system. Believe in it. Work with it. Join us at the table of academic membership, as soon as you can.

Jonathan B. Hall, FAGO, received Associate certification in 1997, winning both the Associateship and S. Lewis Elmer prizes. He became a Fellow in 1999. He is dean of the Brooklyn AGO Chapter, and writes and speaks on topics of organ history and performance. He is also a teacher of organ and piano and has coached several working church musicians on the Guild examinations.



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