

TESTING ORGANIST SKILLS – AN INNOVATIVE MODEL FOR THE FUTURE? by John Riley

St Avaricious College in Stickby in Marsh in Lincolnshire is an Anglican boarding school, with a long and cavernous chapel, and liturgically in a very elevated position up the candle. The College has a reputation for many things; not least, its standards of chapel music; or to be more precise, for the lamentable standards to which it sunk in recent years, due in no small part to a series of unfortunate and misjudged appointments of chapel organists, who have found themselves distinctly wanting in meeting the various and considerable demands that make up the life of an organist.

In order to ensure that this unacceptable state of affairs is not perpetuated, the new governors have drawn up a particularly stringent SAS level assault course of an interview and audition, in the form of a fully blown chapel service, and designed to weed out all but the hardiest and musically bomb-proof of candidates. The process has been partly drawn up and verified by Bishop Grosseteste Music College, Lincoln, (named after John Grosseteste (c. 1175 –1253), the former Bishop of Lincoln).

The Royal College of Organists were offered this template for a new enhanced skills diploma. However, after some consideration, they have evidently decided to remain with their current modes of assessment.

Each candidate undergoes the same process over a period of weeks. The ‘congregation’ is also augmented by various visiting groups, such as the naval cadets from Scuttlefleet-on-Sea and the local choral society from Topsy-on-the-Wold.

I have obtained, via a member of the whistle (as opposed to organ) blowing fraternity within The School, a copy of the standard interview procedure. It reads as follows:

SERVICE PREPARATION

The printed order of service should have at least one hymn with an extra verse to that in the hymnbook and another hymn with one less. All hymns should be taken from the very beginning or end of the hymnbook, thereby ensuring that the pages of the organist’s music edition keep flipping over, (music desk clips to be removed).

DAY BEFORE INTERVIEW

Candidate arrives at the College and is taken to the chapel.

The candidate is informed that prior to the formal audition the following day, there will be opportunity to practice with the choir and conductor, (Director of Music), from 9.30 to 10.30. The candidate will be informed that anything played above *mf* on the organ will all but drown out the sound of singing from downstairs. However, the candidate should find that they can easily see over the console and will in addition be shown the added aid of a colour monitor to view the conductor; also the loudspeaker monitor to relay the spoken parts of the liturgy at the opposite end of the chapel. The candidate is given three hours in which to practice the various parts of the service, including the special 'test-anthem'; also to set up the registrations in the multi - channel memory.

At the last possible minute, the candidate will also be introduced to the psalm; a barely decipherable hand written setting in quasi plainsong style by a previous director of Music, Dr. Hart-Knox; replete with bold and disjointed modern harmony and very considerable ambiguities of pitch and rhythm. Although the pointing and breaks are more or less evident, the candidate is to be informed that The School 'has their own way of doing it', but that they will 'easily get the hang of it' at tomorrow's practice. The candidate is given the option of reharmonising the melody, should they deem it appropriate.

Prior to this, many of the seats and sound absorbent fittings are to be removed so as to give the full three-second echo and to provide the candidate with an extravagant confidence-building and self-affirming wash of sound to their playing.

Immediately after the candidate has left the chapel:

- Organ tuner is to de-tune selected notes on the reeds, remove a choice selection of pipes and set up their patented remotely - operated cipher system, plus a sprinkling of other booby traps; all to ensure that anything in certain keys (to be confirmed) are not seriously viable, and to test sight transposition skills into keys that will remain more intact.

- Janitors to fill the chapel with all seats and the usual extra absorbent furnishings. This, and the full chapel tomorrow, will ensure an acoustic deadened to the level of a doctor's waiting room and cruelly expose the slightest imperfection. (Technique and confidence test).
- Pin to be taken out of one side of the height adjustable organ bench, so that seat collapses on one side, thereby creating a healthy gradient on which the candidate will slide. Candidate will be told tomorrow that the pin has broken and that the only remedy is to remove the other pin from the other side. Result: the candidate can no longer see over the console top and will be in less than optimal playing position. (Physical contortion and malleability test).

Overnight Arrangements (Stamina Test):

Usual arrangements at the 'Crown and Anchor' Inn. Ensure that the candidate is accommodated in the room right above the bar with the 'special' mattress, which should ensure a memorable if less than complete night's sleep.

In return for the usual gratuities, the locals in the bar are to perform a hearty rendition of some indigenous vocal repertoire, including several encores *al fresco*; all this interleaved with a healthy dose of the local vernacular in boisterous verbal and physical exchanges, upon a leisurely departure homewards.

This should all ensure somewhat compromised faculties on the part of the candidate by the morning.

For breakfast, chef is to add a little of his special mixture to the candidate's scrambled eggs, so as to provide a totally harmless but vague degree of internal distraction. (N.B. the legendary 'Donkey's Kick' enhancement, usually reserved for members of the School inspection teams or auditors, is not appropriate for this occasion.)

AUDITION SCHEDULE

9.15: Candidate to be informed that due to an oversight in the diary, there will be no opportunity after all to practice with the choir, this slot being occupied by a special service for the Society of St. Winifred, (Sickley-by-Sea branch). During this time their organist will 'accidentally' :-

- Introduce some surprises into the candidate's stored registrations
- Hide the candidate's carefully prepared pile of music into some obscure location within the chaotic piles of music in the organ loft
- Replace one of the loose pages of the test anthem with that of an unrelated piece.
- Totally remove all the Kevin Mayhew volumes of '1001 easy and sight-readable pieces to cover liturgical disasters, emergencies and embarrassing moments'.

10.20: **Presence of mind and stress test I:** Candidate moves to the organ loft and finds that not all is as expected.

10.25: **Analysis of faults and strategic emergency planning skills test:** Candidate finds that not all with the organ is as expected.

10.40: Pupils and staff start to enter chapel. Candidate to start quiet pre-service voluntaries.

10.45: **Musical focus test I:** Windows of the adjacent gym to be opened wide and 'music' for the community keep fit class turned to maximum level, (3 minutes duration).

10.50: **Musical focus test II:** Wife of Deputy Head to bring little Horace into the chapel. His well-known aversion and dread of all sounds organistic will precipitate a predictable and significant vocal response. (Horace and comforting mother to leave at 10.54).

10.55: **Improvisation test 1:- Prelude on a drone bass:** Remotely controlled persistent and untraceable bass cipher to be activated. (10.58: cipher to be neutralised.)

11.05: **Improvisation test II (freestyle):** Pupil to inform candidate that the guest Celebrant has been unavoidably delayed by around 10 minutes, due to movement of animal herds on the road.

11.25: Service commences

Hymn 1: Improvisation test III (short hymn prelude); Candidate to instantly realise that they are playing one verse too many, and to disguise the error of their ways by turning it into a convincing hymn extension/prelude.

Magnificat: Flying on two rather than three engines test; Partway through, Pupil 'B' to open large upper window, (the ever present North Sea wind should duly oblige), necessitating candidate to hold onto music with one hand and skilfully re-distribute the notes between pedal and remaining free hand.

Hymn 2: Body language/sign language test; Candidate to recognise from the key expressions of those below that their spectacularly reharmonised and ever climaxing last verse is actually the penultimate one.

Psalm: Aural acuity and anticipation test; Candidate to follow the melodic line of the congregation with split second timing; anticipate lengths of pauses; reharmonise in such a way to maximise the chances of the next melody note fitting the harmony notes.

Sung Responses: Presence of mind and calmness test II; Celebrant to depart significantly from the written wording and order. During this time, Technician to create some intermittent buzzes and outages of the relay monitor.

Test Anthem: General musical white knuckle ride and emotional survival test;

1. At the trickiest corner possible, Technician to remotely send the monitor picture into various forms of apoplexies.
2. By prior arrangement, conductor and choir to skip two beats. The candidate will then be assessed according to how quickly they climb back on board in synch with the choir, and realise it was not their fault.

3. At the point when general musical distress is well-established, and heading well in the direction of beyond hope and salvation, Headmaster to give a wilting look and shake of head towards the Director of Music, who will by now be emitting clear looks of despair and resignation; all to be picked up in the camera.

Hymn 3: Internal conception triumphing over what you are actually hearing test; Celebrant to 'accidentally' leave microphone on and sing dominantly in a style considerably divergent in matters of pitch and rhythm to the rest of the congregation, and all accepted norms for that particular hymn.

Hymn 4 (Offertory): Improvisation test IV (extended hymn prelude); As the brimming collection plates, carried by Pupils 'D' and 'E', near the altar, Pupil 'F' to release marbles into their path, thereby ensuring spectacular falls of grace, wild and loud mirth on the part of the School community, and the wide scattering of coins and notes across the chapel. Given the legendary entrepreneurial ethos of the School community, (in the spirit of the founder), a timely and thorough retrieval is essential.

Final Voluntary: Musical memory and depth of learning test; Candidates will generally have picked a long, demanding and showy piece, generally at the extreme limits of their capabilities on a good day; they also tend to use loose-leaf copies to minimise page turns. By now, nicely weakened and desperate for merciful release, the candidate will encounter a veritable finale. Page-turner (Pupil 'G') will, at suitable moments, turn two pages at once, or knock a page to the floor and replace on the stand out of order or upside down. The clandestine alterations made to the candidate's piston settings allocated to this piece will further ensure an interpretation of an unconventional and randomly evolving nature.

At the end of the service, Matron and her bespoke collection of in-house medications and other remedies will be available for any less than stalwart candidate.

End of practical test.

The classroom teaching test, of equivalent grade, will follow the next morning, (q.v.).

