

RSCM Bristol & Swindon Area

Bronze & Silver Chorister Award

Some Preparatory Notes for Choir-Trainers & Choristers

1 Introduction

We hope that the following notes will prove helpful to both Choir Trainers and Candidates in preparing for Dean's and Bishop's Awards. Some of the material is derived from other RSCM Area syllabuses which - like ours - have also been prepared according to national guidelines, and for which awards are now moderated ('validated') against a single national standard. This has been to ensure that they represent fundamentally the same level of achievement, wherever they are awarded throughout the RSCM. Our examiners have all attended centrally organised moderating meetings, so that they are aware of the level expected, and regularly have the opportunity to discuss interpretation of the syllabus with RSCM HQ staff and colleagues from other RSCM Areas.

The following notes supplement the more formal guidance, which is contained within the syllabus.

2 General Notes

Look carefully at the marking scheme, and note those Sections which carry the most weight. For example; Section A constitutes 50% of the marks for the whole exam and it follows from this, that candidates should ...

- a) Prepare their three "prepared items" (ie hymn, psalm, anthem) well. If your candidate can sing the Section A items well, then that is an easy way for him/her to earn the bulk of their marks. These awards are not purely a reward for commitment or long service (although this is the subject of Section D, the testimonial); candidates must be fundamentally able to do what is required. So....
- b) Please do not enter candidates, whom you do not expect to pass, or simply because "it is their turn". It is always sad for all concerned when someone fails, and usually very disheartening and counter-productive for the candidate. If your candidate can genuinely do what is recommended for *Voice for Life* Dark Blue ribbon, then he/she should have no problem with Dean's Award; likewise with *Voice for Life* Red ribbon and the Bishop's Award.

Although the syllabus contents for Bronze/Dean's and Silver/Bishop's awards are similar, you will see from the syllabus that Bishop's exams are marked against more criteria, as well as a higher general standard of performance being expected. The level of musicianship displayed and the perceptiveness and comprehensiveness of the answers to questions, are also important discriminators between Dean's and Bishop's in terms of the overall standard expected.

3 Specific Comments/Notes

3.1 Section A (50%)

As has been said, good preparation of this section is particularly important. Look in the guidance notes to see the sort of things which will be marked. Don't forget that your accompanist accompanies the candidate throughout all of this section.

- a) Choose the hymn carefully so as to flatter your candidate's better points and not to expose weaknesses! For example, if your candidate has a problem with breathing, then "Lord of all hopefulness" (with its tremendously long lines) wouldn't be a sensible choice. As the hymn will normally be done first in the exam, it should also be something within a comfortable range, which the candidate likes and can use to settle in to the exam environment. Candidates should be capable of being still substantially in tune at the end of their unaccompanied verse. All three verses should be sung straight off, without more than the normal break between them. So, the accompanist stops playing for the second verse, and naturally resumes playing for the third.
- b) Let the psalm flow with the word rhythm – don't let it become in any way metrical! Don't forget to phrase off ends of verses/half verses. *It should be noted that "the psalm must be sung to Anglican Chant, Plainsong Tone or as a responsorial psalm, sung in recitative style (ie not a metrical psalm-song nor hymn setting of a psalm)".*
- c) The prepared piece (eg Anthem) carries the highest mark of any single item, so make sure your candidate can sing it accurately, in tune and with plenty of expression. Again, choose it carefully, bearing in mind your candidate's likes, and their strong and weak points. For items, which would normally be unaccompanied, the accompanist should fill in the other voice parts. The candidate will gain more credit (particularly at Bishop's level) if his/her own part is not specifically doubled in the accompaniment.

3.2 Section B (20%)

- a) The accompaniment for the (sung) sight reading will not specifically include the candidate's part. For the Dean's Award, candidates sing the tune, for the Bishop's Award they sing their own part.
- b) Singing back as an echo is equivalent to ABRSM Grade 3 test B for Dean's level, and Grade 5 test A for the Bishop's award. Books of example ABRSM tests are available in most music shops.
- c) Considerable preparation for the questions in this section can be done with the prepared piece. For example, the candidate should know the key of the piece (major modulations as well at Bishop's level), understand the time signature(s) and know the meaning of all the Italian/ musical terms.

3.3 Section C (10%)

The Voice for Life "Choir Trainer's Book" (*RSCM stock code F0100*) contains a very good summary of what should be known at each level, with sample questions and example answers, and you are recommended to read this.

- Dean's Award candidates should be capable of questions to Dark Blue level, and
- Bishop's Award candidates to Red level.

The questions in this section could, if appropriate, be framed as a short dialogue; the later questions would therefore depend on the candidate's answers to the earlier ones.

The following example piece (Stanford's "*Beati quorum via*") is from the Bishop's syllabus, but is here used as an example for Dean's Award as well. The answers given are just a guide as to what could be said; they are not necessarily all that could be said, but equally, there is probably more here than you need to say for a good response.

The example answers given (in the questions which are common to Dean's and Bishop's) represent what would get a very good mark at Bishop's Award, and are written in somewhat adult terms. A Dean's candidate would not be expected to say this much, and young candidates would be expected to answer according to their age and experience.

Bear in mind also that whilst (of necessity) these notes on this section are quite lengthy, it counts for only 10% of the marks in the overall exam.

At Dean's level, here are some example questions (from the Dark Blue singer's worksheet):

- Who wrote the music? *CV Stanford.*
- When did the composer live (Give dates, musical period or century)? *Stanford lived from 1852 to 1924. (19th/early 20th centuries.)*
- In what country did the composer live? *Stanford was born in Dublin (Ireland), but lived much of his life in England. He also spent considerable time studying in Leipzig and Berlin (Germany).*
- Name another piece by this composer, or another composer who lived around this time.
There are lots to choose from (one or two would do, or a few at Bishop's level). This motet is one of a set of three, the others being "Justorum animae" and "Coelos ascendit hodie". Apart from these, Stanford also wrote numerous other anthems – for example, "Ye choirs of new Jerusalem" (for Easter), "O for a closer walk with God" and "The Lord is my shepherd". The service settings in A (double choir), B flat, C, F and G (the latter with big treble and bass solos) are also well known. If you can name something that you have done yourself, so much the better. Another composer of the same period was Charles Wood (1866 – 1926). You may have sung his anthem "O thou the central orb", or (if you have a very large choir), "Hail, gladdening light" (it's for double choir).
- Explain simply what the whole text means, or what it is saying. *The copy gives the translation as "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord". So it is about obedience to the law of the Lord.*
- What language is the text written in? *Latin.*
- What key is the piece written in? *A flat. (This question might instead be asked under Section B.)*

- What is its time signature? *3-4 time or 3 crotchet beats to a bar (This might also be asked under Section B).*
- How many parts is it written for? *Six – two soprano, one alto, one tenor, two bass.*
- What is the mood of the music? *This question is quite subjective. One answer could be that, generally, the piece is quite calm, but there are two big climaxes, perhaps in praise of those who follow the law of the Lord.*
- When would it be performed? *It's very suitable as a communion motet, but could also be used as an introit or even at the gradual.*

The following additional questions might be asked at Bishop's level (examples from the Red singer's worksheet):

- When would the piece normally be sung – at a particular time of year or for a particular event? *Beati quorum was composed in 1905 for Alan Gray and the Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge (Stanford's old college). It's thought it was written as a grace to be sung at College feasts. This probably isn't something most parish choirs will be expected to do that often! However, the piece is very suitable at any time, but looking at the words, it would be particularly fitting on a Saint's Day.*
- Where do the words come from (eg Bible, prayer, poem, etc)? *It's Psalm 119 verse 1 (so a passage from the Bible). It was probably originally written in Hebrew. Although at least some psalms are thought to have been written by King David, many were probably not – so we do not know who wrote it, nor exactly when.*
- Can you name other composers who wrote in the same period? *There are plenty, but (in addition to Wood, mentioned above) prominent ones in church music include Elgar, Parry and (slightly later) Vaughan Williams, and abroad Fauré and Bruckner. Even better if you have sung and can name any music by these!*
- Can you find out any other interesting information about the composer (eg job, family, etc)?
 - : *Stanford's father was a keen amateur musician in Dublin. Stanford was educated at Queens College, Cambridge, and was subsequently appointed Organist of Trinity College, Cambridge. He was appointed Professor of Music at Cambridge and then Professor of Composition at the Royal College of Music, and was knighted in 1901. His pupils included Wood, Howells, Vaughan Williams, Holst and Ireland.*
 - : *Stanford is now known principally for his church music, but he also wrote orchestral and chamber works, oratorios, operas and part songs, almost all being now largely unknown. From studying in Germany, his music was considerably influenced by Brahms.*
 - : *The First World War brought personal conflicts for Stanford, since he had many friends in Germany.*
 - : *Stanford died in London.*

3.4 Section D [Testimonial]

Section D is not examined as such. Requirements for it are met by the testimonial on the candidate's application form. Candidates are expected to be committed and exemplary members of their choir, and we hope that choir trainers will rigorously observe the spirit of this.

3.5 Section E (20%)

3.5.1 General Points

This section is what distinguishes the test from a simple music exam. It carries 20% of the marks and should not be overlooked in preparation – indeed, if well prepared, it provides another straightforward opportunity to gain marks.

Some parts are a simple recall of learned facts, but others are designed to show that the candidate has a good understanding of the role that music has to play in the life of their church.

a) Dean's

- Major Festival of the Church's year (*Christmas, Passiontide, Easter, Whitsun*)

You will be asked which festival you have chosen, so be prepared to answer some more in-depth questions about the festival. This will establish how much you have researched or already know.

You will need to know where that festival fits in the church's year in relation to other festivals. You are asked to understand the bible story (or stories) that relate to that festival. If a particular story is to be found in more than one book of the bible, then you should be prepared to share that information with your examiner.

You will also need to select for that festival:

- a Hymn, Psalm or Worship-song and
- an Anthem

[these should not be the same as those selected for Section A]

Be prepared to explain why you have chosen those particular items and where/why they are suited for use at the festival. You should have copies of them with you and be prepared to sing parts of them to the examiner. Therefore choose items that you know and feel comfortable singing.

Rather than simply selecting isolated elements for this section, it is worth considering them properly in the context of a service that you might select for that festival (eg a festival service of evening prayer). This will provide a framework for the items you have chosen and enable you more clearly to demonstrate how they fit together and support the overall worship for the festival.

See also the notes above for Section B, questions from which may also be asked about the music you have chosen for your festival.

- Sunday Service

For this section you should understand and be able to describe the main sung parts of a Sunday service at your church; (if it is not from the Church of England service book Common Worship or Book of Common Prayer, please bring a typical Order of Service for the examiner). As a possible example for a Church of England service of Eucharist, then one might expect such elements as the: Gloria (or Kyrie Eleison during Advent and Lent), Gospel Acclamations, Sursum Corda, Sanctus & Benedictus, Agnus Dei;

A good candidate will have an understanding of the biblical (or other) origin of such elements as indicated at the end of this document (*this is a specific requirement of the Bishop's Award*).

- **Chorister's Responsibility for and Contribution to the Worship of the Church**

This is a good subject for a group discussion between choir members, choir director and clergy team; as preparation for your Dean's examination. Think about why we have music in our churches, why is a choir necessary. This would cover support of the congregation in their prayer - both for the spoken and sung parts of the service. Also it might consider the place of the music in worship, for example:

:Words of a hymn or anthem can be made a personal prayer by the singer.

:Reflective music can aid meditative prayer.

:Joyful music can inspire praise.

b) Bishop's

- **Biblical References**

The candidate is required to understand and explain the origin of any two of the following elements of our liturgy: Our Father, Sanctus, Gloria, Agnus Dei, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis. The table at the end of this document provides references for each of these. A good candidate would as a matter of course also be able to demonstrate an understanding of the answers to the questions required for the Dean's award under this Section.

- **Seasons of the Church's year** (*but not Christmas, Passiontide, Easter nor Whitsun/Pentecost*)

You will be asked which season of the church's year you have chosen, about which you must be prepared to answer some more in-depth questions. This will establish how much you have researched or prepared.

You are asked to prepare/select for a church service at that season.

:an anthem and

:hymn/psalm/worship-song

[these should not be the same as those selected for Section A]

You will need to know where the service fits in the church's year in relation to other festivals and explain why you have chosen that period and the reasons for the selection of music and readings.

You should have copies of the music and reading(s) with you and be prepared to sing parts of the musical elements to the examiner. Therefore choose items that you know and feel comfortable singing.

See also the notes above for Section B, questions from which may also be asked about the music you have chosen for your service.

- **Chorister's Responsibility for and Contribution to the Worship of the Church**

This is a good subject for a group discussion between choir members, choir director and clergy team; as preparation for your Bishop's examination. Think about why we have music in our churches, why is a choir necessary. This would cover support of the congregation in their prayer - both for the spoken and sung parts of the service. Also it might consider the place of the music in worship, for example:

:Words of a hymn or anthem can be made a personal prayer by the singer.

:Reflective music can aid meditative prayer.

:Joyful music can inspire praise.

Magnificat	Luke Ch 1 vv 46-55	<p><u>Mary's Song</u></p> <p>46 And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. 51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. 52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."</p>
Nunc Dimittis	Luke Ch 2 vv 29-32	<p><u>Jesus Presented in the Temple</u></p> <p>25Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:</p> <p>29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."</p>