

Going for Bronze

John Wardle offers advice on preparing for the RSCM Bronze award to singers and their choir trainers.



Are you a singer working busily through the *Voice for Life* Dark Blue training book or a choir leader, or singing teacher, training your singers at this level? You may know already that the RSCM Bronze standard award will soon be within grasp (many Areas refer to this as their Dean's Award). It is open to RSCM members of all ages, singing the melody line or a lower part (at their choice). Of course there is no compulsion to take a first, externally assessed, singing award straight after completing the Dark Blue level and some singers prefer to begin the next stage (Red) before progressing to the Bronze award. But the Dark Blue targets, all successfully completed, will provide you with the launch pad for Bronze success.

Why take this award?

Younger singers in your choir may often be entered for the Dean's Award at this stage of training and will enjoy wearing their distinctive bronze medallion with green ribbon, but the new award syllabuses have been designed to appeal to older singers too. But why should you take your Bronze assessment? Here are some possible reasons:

- ▶ To build your personal singing confidence, which will help others in the choir too.
- ▶ To increase your musical knowledge; this will lead, in turn, to faster singing progress.

- ▶ To give your choir and congregation a chance to congratulate you on your success. It is a mark of good fellowship when we can share each other's joys as well as sorrows.
- ▶ Above all, to gain some useful experience to help enhance your own and others' singing ministry week by week.
- ▶ You will be examined by an RSCM validated examiner, who will be able to report fairly and sympathetically on your strengths (and any weaknesses) and give you an accurately assessed mark for each test.

Preparing for success

Rather like learning to drive, the singer engaged in *Voice for Life* training is in the driving seat of a dual-controlled machine. When you are in doubt, or lose your way, you trust you will be helped not to crash by the singers around you and your choir trainer! But the Bronze exam can feel much more like the driving test, so the wise instructor will have given you some opportunities before the day to 'drive solo' and gain the necessary confidence 'behind the wheel.' Perhaps a solo verse in the Carol Service, or a short solo line in an anthem one Sunday, will get you started. You will learn not to be disconcerted by your own sound, and how to keep pitch securely without any help from neighbouring voices. We all may suffer from nerves in this situation and there are helpful tips on page 12 of the *Voice for Life* Dark Blue book. Always use your warm-up exercises before solo work, to help your voice to work at its optimum. The tonguing exercises (page 9 of the Dark Blue book) are good examples.

Whether adult or child, a successful Bronze award candidate will perform with some confidence and technical security, the notes engagingly 'lifting off the page'. If the whole exam is prepared to that standard, the examiner will hope to award a distinction. Most of us, however, have some weak areas, whether in the voice, in our technical grasp, in sight-reading or elsewhere. But it is still possible to gain a pass, or even a merit, if conscientious preparation has been made to meet the challenge. The examiner will be disappointed, however, if one aspect seems to have had no preparation whatever, as sometimes this can make all the difference between a pass and a fail result.

Here are the components of the Bronze award, as they appear in your *Voice for Life* training books, with the weighting of each section:

- ▶ Section A: the prepared hymn, psalm and anthem – 50%
- ▶ Section B: sight-reading, aural tests, technical knowledge – 20%
- ▶ Section C: understanding the repertoire you are singing – 10%
- ▶ Section D: belonging to the choir – testimonial
- ▶ Section E: choir in context, Christian understanding – 20%

Firstly then, study your local Bronze (Dean's) syllabus and ensure you understand each requirement, so you can make a decent attempt at it. Ask your choir trainer, or another helpful adult, to give you a short weekly training session, to cover all the

aspects of the syllabus, for a couple of months leading up to the exam. Your priest, minister or chaplain might like to help you prepare the Section E requirements. Look back over the pages in the *Voice for Life Dark Blue* book that relate to any part of the syllabus that you still find challenging. If you can work towards the exam together with another singer for mutual support, so much the better: you can help each other by spotting strengths and weaknesses, and encouraging each other to work hard at particular things before next week's session.

Secondly, you will see that the syllabus contains some criteria for success. Do your choir leader and your training partner think that you already show many of the characteristics of a 'good' candidate? Do you, for instance, 'project the voice well? Convey the mood of the music and reflect the meaning of the text? Articulate consonants clearly?' Some of these, at least, should become second nature. And if they do, the whole choir benefits from your increased confidence and skill. These things are infectious.

Opposite each of the 'good' criteria, you will see a statement that may characterize the 'poor' candidate. It is, again, a statement of habit: you would never be penalized badly for any one small slip, but where the same thing happens repeatedly and spoils your performance, the examiner must take note. It is rare to fail at Bronze standard, however, on the basis of just one 'poor' characteristic: it would have to be very severe and obtrusive. More often, a disappointing result emerges from a combination of weak aspects that have not been determinedly tackled over a long enough period of time. The mark sheet that you receive after the exam alongside your result will always make this clear.



Thirdly, you should help each other with practising the technical tests. Frequent practice, as part of a weekly routine, can help develop confidence and the ability to overcome slips. As the 'good' criteria have it, you should be 'able to sing with conviction even when wrong'. There are useful pages of examples, such as the one shown, in the *Voice for Life Choir Trainers Book* (Order ref. F0100) pp. 166-171. Helpful aural training examples are included here too.

Example 1: sample sightreading test

It is worth considering using a music stand in the final weeks of your Award practice and on the day itself. It can help prevent tension building up from having to hold your music, and (if it is adjusted to the correct height) you can stand near it, perhaps a little to one side, and show that you know your pieces confidently without constantly referring to the copy.

Good singing habits

None of this is rocket science, and your greatest strength lies in week-by-week participation in your choir's ministry. Be self-critical, and aim for the very best sound you can produce, each week as you sing. Don't be distracted by any less motivated members. Ask for honest, constructive criticism from others, so that any bad habits, perhaps more evident to others than to you, can be rooted out. With your Dark Blue targets all fulfilled, you should already know your own strengths and weaknesses, but sometimes, after the tick in the target box, it is easy to relapse into old habits of posture, breathing or diction in the absence of gentle reminders!

The Bronze award is the preliminary singing assessment for RSCM members. After it, you may well be inspired to redouble your commitment and look towards preparation for the intermediate, Silver award which is also offered by your local Area. Good luck, and good singing!

♦ John Wardle is chairman of RSCM Sussex Area, and chief examiner for RSCM singing awards. In the next issue, he will offer some advice for success at the RSCM Silver award.