

## Going for Gold

John Wardle offers advice on meeting the challenges of the RSCM Gold award.

The Gold Award was launched to replace the old, age-limited, St Nicolas and St Cecilia Awards which ceased operation in 2003. The new award is examined to exactly the same standards, and is now available to RSCM members of all ages, worldwide. It is the pinnacle of success in the RSCM *Voice for Life* training scheme.

A revised syllabus, operative for the next four years, has just come into effect. As the entry deadline date for this session, 1 October, is rapidly approaching, singers intending to enter need to take note now! Here are the main changes:

- ▶ Your written submissions must accompany your entry.
- ▶ The new entry fee is £65.
- ▶ In the psalmody test, 1(b), there is no longer a free choice: instead, you must select one of the five prescribed portions to sing to either Anglican chant or plainsong.

We have also added repertoire choices to help make the award more appealing to singers from high-voice (e.g. school) choirs. You must still choose some standard SATB repertoire, but three of your Section B pieces may now be chosen in SS or SSAA format, together with your psalmody and (for young singers) the option of a treble solo for the Prepared solo item. That is half the total amount of music for the exam. See the full Gold Award syllabus on the website ([www.rscm.com/education/gold\\_award.php](http://www.rscm.com/education/gold_award.php)), or obtain it by post from RSCM Education.

### Starting now to prepare for Gold?

You'll already have a good Silver standard pass (preferably a merit or a distinction) and have started your Yellow Workbook in *Voice for Life*. When you complete it, everything you need as a springboard for success will be in place; then you'll also need some more confidence, and wider singing experience, to make it a reality. So here are some other essential tips:

- ▶ Book yourself some individual singing lessons. Your choir trainer may be able to offer you these, or advise you on whom to approach. Understanding (at first hand) more of how your voice works will give you greater freedom to express yourself fully.
- ▶ Go on an RSCM residential course, whether at cathedral standard or one of our shorter away-breaks (for children or adults). It is unlikely that you are surrounded by many other Gold Award hopefuls in your own home choir; being among other singers with similar aspirations, for a short period away, can boost your morale and challenge you to achieve more. Ask RSCM Education for advice on where you might attend.
- ▶ Find out about joining RSCM Cathedral Singers: we regularly sing Gold Award repertoire items in our services.
- ▶ Look for a local or regional choir or choral society, to give you extra experience of more varied repertoire, and different styles of interpretation.
- ▶ Recruit a good accompanist!

Examiners are sympathetic to the technical demands of accompaniments. We would much rather hear a quite simple, sensitive approach (keeping time, but with difficult notes omitted) from players who know their limitations, but one in whom you, as soloist, have confidence. Work with your accompanist regularly, well before the exam. You are not penalized for any wrong notes the accompanist might play; but if you feel you lack confidence in the co-ordination, it might affect your singing performance in ways we cannot ignore.

### Hitting the mark!

There is a big step from Silver to Gold, and you won't achieve it overnight. It will be an even greater thrill when you finally succeed! Choose wisely, and prepare well all your Section A and B items (there are ten in all, five in each Section). There is wide choice for each voice part in Section A, but some pieces will suit you much better than others. Take time to explore the options, and seek advice. As for Section B, even though it has a lot to do with interpretation, it will only 'take off' if you know your notes thoroughly in advance: then, working alongside the examiner, you'll be able to demonstrate much more readily what can be done with each piece.

The 'bare pass standard' is set higher at Gold level than at Bronze and Silver. (This is exactly as it was with the St Nicolas and St Cecilia Awards.) Just singing the right notes will not do: they must be accompanied by a selection of the tips given for *Good candidates* under *Useful guidance* on pp. 10–11 of the



Dylan Barnett, the first Australian Gold Award winner

syllabus. These criteria are more exacting than your Bronze and Silver ones. Habitually, avoid as many of the negative criteria as possible, since even one of these, if obtrusive, can take your mark below the pass threshold.

There are eight specific technical aspects of your performances in Sections A and B which your examiner will assess: they are shown on this 'healthcheck' chart (Example 1). Why not use it as you prepare? (You will also find it on the RSCM website.) Get your trainer to listen and produce you a 'health graph', hopefully the line always hovering bravely well above pass level! It is important that your singing in both Sections is prepared to a consistently good standard. A similar 'health graph' may help you prepare Section E, too. You can find it on the website. All the aspects shown here are covered in the questions your examiner will ask.

A Gold Award pass is often awarded to a young singer who has recently attended an RSCM cathedral course, and is a leading singer in their own choir, consistently attending and conscientiously preparing. A boy, however, will often have only a narrow window of opportunity before the treble voice starts to lose its best quality. Once signs of change have set in, it may be too late for you to achieve Gold Award success as a treble, and far better to wait and prepare it as a young adult singer. Don't try to sing treble beyond your capabilities; instead now start to enjoy singing a little alto (or tenor or bass, if appropriate) for your future benefit. Read the helpful guidance given you in the appendix of the *Voice for Life* Choir Trainer's book (or see 'From boys to men', an article on boys' changing voices on p. 18).

### How else should I prepare?

In Section C, you must write 800 words about aspects of your Section A programme, explaining some background (composers and the music itself) and giving your personal reflections. This is a very useful first step towards the kind of research that all adult recitalists are expected to share with their audience, and younger performers will find it a very helpful preparation for their GCSE and A level music studies.

You must include a bibliography to show that you studied various written (and, maybe, internet) sources before you began your notes. It is your choice whether to invest the 800 words in a detailed study of one of your Section A pieces, or to write a more general overview of two or three pieces. The examiner will always start the questions by encouraging you to explain, or expand upon, one of your points; so you must also be ready to talk about any of your Section A items, even ones you decided not to write about.

In Section E, too, the questions begin with your submitted written plans for a simple, non-denominational evening service suitable for a given occasion. There are four choices: Epiphany, Maundy Thursday, Ascension Day or Christ the King. Do use your own initiative in planning this: you will lose marks if you just pick up a denominational liturgy. Present your prayer, and your reading, confidently to the examiner: we'd like to hear at least as much clarity and expression as if you were reading aloud to a congregation in your own church or chapel. A simple explanation is also needed of the suitability of each item you have chosen, as well as of the 'shape' of your service. All this puts into practice things you have studied in your *Voice for Life* Section E projects. The Section finishes with the examiner checking that you know about, and are able to choose some suitable music for, any of the festivals and seasons you celebrate during the Christian year.

The RSCM Gold Award is, undoubtedly, a challenging enterprise for any chorister. Encouragingly, over 140 singers already hold the Award since 2003, sixteen of them achieving Honours (90% and above). Two-fifths of the total are adult singers. When you join them, your achievement will be worthy of great celebration in your choir. Good luck, and good singing!

♦ John Wardle is chairman of RSCM Sussex Area, and chief examiner for RSCM singing awards.

### Example 1: Gold healthcheck chart

