

Going for Silver

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

In the last issue of CMQ we studied the demands of the RSCM Bronze standard award. If you already hold a Bronze award, or a similar alternative qualification – and once you have completed your Red *Voice for Life* book – you will be ready to consider entering for the next assessment, the RSCM Silver standard award. (Many Areas refer to this as their Bishop's Award). The Red targets, all successfully completed, provide you with the launch pad for Silver success. Having already passed the preliminary award, and attended one or two helpful training events (offered regularly, we hope, by your Area) you will be well prepared to enter the exam room a second time!

Why take this award?

Younger singers in your choir may often be entered for the Bishop's Award at this stage of training, but the new Area syllabuses have been designed to appeal to older choristers too. You will already have gained considerably in confidence and experience from your Bronze training, and will now be helping to lead your section as new music is learnt. You will understand the importance of being able to sing 'more than just the notes on the page'. If you sing a lower part, you will be able to hold your line accurately, balancing the sound sensitively with the other parts around you. Preparing for the Silver award will also ensure that you continue to build your personal singing confidence, helping the whole choir to tackle new, more demanding challenges successfully. Your musical knowledge will be increasing significantly, too. All these factors will be helping to enhance your own, and others', singing ministry, week by week.

Singers who perform well enough to gain a merit or distinction in their Silver assessment are strongly encouraged to go on and begin preparation for the RSCM Gold Award – more on this in the next issue of CMQ.

Hitting the mark!

Roughly speaking, you stand a 20% chance of gaining a distinction result, and only a 5% chance of failing your Silver Award. What can you do to increase your likelihood of obtaining the former, and reduce the chance of the latter? Needless to say, you will want to sing all the right notes, but, by itself, that is not going to guarantee you success at this level.

The music you will sing for your Silver assessment will, of course, be of a generally more demanding standard than you sang at Bronze. The hymn, for instance, will have a greater number of lines in the verses, and you may well be expected to sing certain verses unaccompanied in both your psalm and your hymn. Anthems (often drawn from the RSCM *Silver Collection*) are more difficult, and altos, tenors and basses must now sing their own voice part. In other parts of the Silver syllabus, too, such as sight singing, and Section E (choir in context), the content of the tests has progressed considerably from Bronze.

There are several 'pointers' that you should notice in your

Silver syllabus. *Marks awarded will give considerable weight to interpretation and musicality* in your prepared anthem. As you sing, the examiner will be listening for *maturity of tone appropriate to the candidate's age and experience*. And every syllabus contains helpful guidance (or 'criteria') for candidates and their trainers. For instance, 'good' candidates will *demonstrate a good dynamic range and an understanding of phrasing and articulation, show an appreciation of musical style appropriate to the piece being performed, and be able to convey the mood of the music and reflect the meaning of the text*.

Your RSCM-validated examiner will listen, mark and report, encouragingly wherever possible, on many or all of eight specific technical aspects of your performance in Section A (Using the voice well): *Posture & presentation, tone & breathing technique, intonation, accuracy of notes or pulse, diction, phrasing & articulation, confidence & security, sense of style*. If you are assessed as 'good' (or better!) at three or four of these, the examiner will be hoping to award you a distinction, if the rest of the exam is at the same encouraging standard. Even if there are 'some lapses' in a couple of these aspects, you may still be awarded a pass (or better) mark. But 'significant concerns' that are heard, even in one aspect (*intonation, accuracy or tone & breathing*, in particular) can lead to a fail mark, as they will often spoil the overall performance for the listener. Significant concern over intonation means that the pitch wanders a lot, perhaps with an uncontrolled vibrato, or stays unhappily 'over' or 'under' the notes – a sure sign of underlying, and by now habitual, problems of production. Poor posture can also contribute to a fail mark, if as a result other aspects (over-frequent breathing or unfocused articulation, perhaps) suffer too.

Another 'pointer' should also be borne in mind. *In order to pass, candidates should demonstrate consistency throughout the examination, though a pass mark in every section is not required*. Although it is not compulsory to obtain a pass in Section A, the marks in this section account for half of the total. So don't enter insufficiently prepared, hoping to make up your pass marks dramatically elsewhere. Examiners are instructed to use a full range of fail marks, where necessary, just as they habitually use a full range of pass marks.

Examiners like to hear a voice performing with panache and 'developing confidence and tone that can usefully help to lead others' in the choir. You will be capable by now of producing an expressive, pleasing quality of sound, but don't always 'sing at one level' – give some nice dynamic variety, too.

A word for choir trainers about a boy's treble voice 'hitting the mark' at Silver standard: if a boy has obtained a good Bronze result as a treble, do consider fast-track Red book training, provided that motivation is maintained. There is often only a narrow window of opportunity before his treble voice starts to lose its best quality. Take advice perhaps from the leaders of an

Area training event that he should attend during this preparation. Often, the message is don't delay. Once his treble voice is past its best, it is much wiser to adopt changing-voice training strategies (see the *Voice for Life* appendix in the Choir Trainers Book) while his new, young adult voice settles in. Don't ask him to try and sing treble beyond his capabilities, as this will only lead to disappointment all round.

How else should I prepare?

In my last article (CMQ, March 2006) I compared your Bronze assessment to a driving test; using the same analogy, your Silver award compares to motorway driving skills, and your Gold is the 'advanced driver' certificate! At each level, the driver must consider all the other road users around; singers perform successfully by using their developing solo skills to enhance the quality of the whole choir. Every now and then, you will be given the chance to 'go solo' but, even then, your job is to provide the right stylistic and expressive framework that enhances the whole, not just the solo, performance. While Section A of *Voice for Life* is of fundamental importance, the other sections are designed to help you develop your knowledge and understanding, of the music itself and of the choir's liturgical role in performing it.

By attending some RSCM training (whether, ideally at this stage, a residential course, or an Area singing day), you can increase your confidence in preparing for this award. The problem of sight singing confidence, however, is not cured by a 'quick fix' but, rather, by regular practice. Aural tests, too, need regular, sustained practice for good results. It is a good idea to

devote some training sessions together (as you did in advance of your Bronze award) to specific practice of these tests. Constructive criticism from others in the group is always a good way to increase your motivation for success!

Don't 'switch off' your mental powers during your Sunday service. Be there regularly, and constantly refresh your knowledge: 'Why is this anthem appropriate today? What is its mood, its key and its important stylistic qualities? Do I understand all the Italian expressive terms I see? What fresh insights about this festival or season are given me today in the sermon, or in the words of this new hymn?' All this will help you answer questions in Section E, about the significance of seasons and festivals that you celebrate in your own church. The source and meaning of various liturgical texts must be known. You will also need to take two copies into the exam room of some chosen items of music, and to explain to your examiner how music helps people to pray. Prepare comments on both the music and the words of your chosen piece, and show that you are aware of the contribution your choir should be making to the worshipping life of your church.

Above all, do enjoy this second, intermediate assessment experience. The examiner will want to put you at your ease, and you will always be encouraged to show the best that you can do. Good luck!

◆ John Wardle is chairman of RSCM Sussex Area, and chief examiner for RSCM singing awards. In the next issue, he will offer advice for those starting to prepare the new syllabus for the RSCM Gold Award.

