



News from the Royal School of Church Music

RSCM'S CHURCH MUSIC SKILLS PROGRAMME

The RSCM has launched a new training programme for church musicians, especially those who are “reluctant volunteers”. The following article is available for reproduction in your magazine or journal free of charge. Further information and background is available at www.rscm.com/skills

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HELP FOR CHURCH MUSICIANS VIA THE WWW.

Among the “first in and last out” on a Sunday are the church musicians – organists, choristers, and instrumentalists. Many of them have had to learn what’s involved “on the job”. Now help is at hand with an innovative training scheme from the Royal School of Church Music (RSCM,) delivered via the internet.

It's Sunday morning, and Nicola Lawrence is running fast down Henrietta Street in Girvan, Ayrshire. She's just finished accompanying the 9.45am service at the local Church of Scotland Parish Church and heading for the 11.0am Mass at the town's Sacred Hearts Church. Apart from this burst of athletics (she hasn't been late yet, she quips), her weekends are indeed musical. Already Nicola will have played for a Saturday evening mass at another Roman Catholic church a few miles away. She is just one of many organists throughout the world who taught herself to play the instrument.

As demand increased for her services, including playing for funerals and weddings, Nicola increasingly felt the need for some training. Eighteen months after signing up for the *Church Music Skills* pilot scheme, she was the first church musician to receive the new RSCM award, having passed the programme's highest level with merit. “I'd been working alone until I enrolled for the course. It's been reassuring to have my recordings of my playing assessed by a professional, and it's done wonders for my confidence.”

Developing skills and understanding

The *Church Music Skills* brochure (downloadable from the RSCM's website at www.rscm.com/skills) succinctly states that the programme aims “to help practising church musicians to develop the skills and understanding they need for their role”. There's a choice of studying methods: the Awards scheme is offered at three levels ranging from Foundation to Higher, while the Flexible Study

Scheme enables participants to “mix and match” a range of units. Whichever option is taken, students choose a Principal Study; currently the programme offers Organist, Choir Director and Cantor. Modules for Music Group Leaders are currently being prepared.

The *RSCM Church Music Skills* programme (*Skills* for short) is arguably the most comprehensive course to provide in-service training for church musicians. The need for it is long-standing. Back in 1978, Lionel Dakers, then Director of the Royal School of Church Music, published a small book called *Making Church Music Work*, with chapters on the influence of the organist as accompanist, the influence of the conductor, how to choose music, and how to rehearse. Dakers stressed that the book “*is intended for those who we sometimes conveniently label the ‘average’ organist, choir master and conductor, many of whom genuinely wish to gain help and extend their expertise.*”

Thirty years on, the *Church Music Skills* programme is intended for exactly the same clientele. “Church music demands a unique range of skills,” says Colin Davey, the programme Director. “The skills programme offers support and inspiration across that range, and affirms the work of church musicians through tutor feedback and the Skills Award.”

In tune with heaven

In an age with a dearth of organists, the programme is intended for an even wider constituency than Dakers’ “average”, especially those who never thought they would find themselves on a Sunday morning seated at an organ console or leading a choir.

The RSCM hopes that ministers and priests will encourage their church musicians to sign up for the scheme. John Harper, the immediate past Director of the RSCM, recalls that even before he took up the post in the late nineties, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Church Music identified an urgent need for training for musicians in their report, *In tune with heaven*. He recalls, “We kept hearing from churches, particularly rural ones, that people even with limited musical ability were being asked to play or take on leading the music. There was a clamour for some in-service training, not just with practical skills, but also with understanding of what the role entails.”

Skills is a distance learning programme, not dissimilar in working practice to the Open University. Units are distributed either electronically or by post, with written and recorded assignments submitted by participants for feedback. “Students set their own timescales, and have the flexibility to cope with changing demands on their time. All of the study takes place in, or relates directly to, their own churches – making it immediately relevant and practical,” says Colin Davey.

Significant interest

So far, more than 70 students from all over the world have signed up for the *Skills* programme, including a half dozen from abroad. One of them, Ian Harrison, is organist of All Souls’ Church in Benoni, South Africa. He was the first student outside the UK to gain a Skills Award. Ian “heartily recommends” the programme for anyone interested or working in church music. “It gives a depth to your understanding which probably would not have been there before.”

Colin Davey, the *Skills* Director, says he's starting to get "significant" interest from clergy interested in sacred music. "Several have said they'd like to recommend their organist or choir trainer to enrol." Alongside the practical units, there are a number of supporting studies units concerning worship and ministry. Subjects range from Sunday worship and pastoral services, to seasons, festivals and liturgical texts. Other supporting studies units cover a range of topics including copyright, working with volunteers, introducing change, and even one called "organising your life." Davey makes no apology for the time management advice. "Many practising church musicians already juggle a job, a home life, and other musical or church commitments."

Be kind to yourself

For the organist, there is a wide range of units, from the accompaniment of hymns and psalms to improvisation. For the beginner, who's probably been dragooned into playing an organ on a Sunday morning and who isn't too sure how the instrument works beyond the ON switch, several introductory units explain all, ranging from stop names to helpful advice on maintenance of the instrument. One study unit, entitled "How to practise", imparts invaluable counsel on everything from choice of music (choose repertoire within or slightly above your standard) and learning the notes, to curing excess tension and low self-esteem (be kind to yourself).

For those opting for Choir Director as their principal skill, there are detailed units on the voice, conducting techniques, and running a rehearsal. As with the organ study, this unit has three levels.

While most assignments are written, students also submit recordings of their performances for evaluation. These may be on CD, MP3, DVD, or video. Nicola Lawrence used an Edirol RO9 digital recorder, but advice is available from the course on what type of recording machine to buy. Ian Harrison in South Africa found the feedback from tutors insightful and helpful. "Practical skills will definitely be improved if comments are taken to heart."

All denominations need good musicians

It was during the 90s that the RSCM changed its image as an elitist institution solely for Anglican robed choirs. The *Skills* programme typifies a fresh breath of ecumenism that now permeates the organisation's ethos. Lindsay Gray, the present Director of the RSCM, is quite emphatic. "It doesn't matter what denomination we're talking about, all churches need good musicians to support what is a key part of church worship." The Cantor study is a case in point. "This one isn't just about Anglican Responses," says Colin Davey, "but focuses on the ministry of singers who lead and inspire music in any church."

A variety of musical styles is being embraced too, from plainsong right up to present day composers such as Graham Kendrick and the Iona Community's John Bell. This fourth principal skill area for Music Group Leaders is currently under development. Lindsay Gray recalls a recent survey by the RSCM in the Guildford area in the south of England. Amongst its findings, it revealed that 52 per cent of churches made use of a music group. "In a changing world I feel we should be encouraging all church musicians to give to the best of their ability – whatever the musical genre," Gray says.

But hold on a moment; couldn't a teacher impart the same material just as well in face-to-face lessons? Daniel Moulton, a freelance organist, accompanist of the RSCM Millennium Youth Choir, and author of many of the organ units argues that *Skills* is of "huge importance" to those players who don't have access to a teacher for whatever reason. "Because the material is so thorough, you could do this course without an individual teacher, so long as you have some basic keyboard knowledge." Interestingly, a number of existing students do have teachers. David Brookes, who teaches organ at a school in Auckland, New Zealand, put forward his pupils to take part in the pilot scheme. "One young player made rapid progress, mastering basic pedalling techniques using the scheme's materials."

At the end of it all, there's the Award – a certificate of affirmation. Daniel Moulton says the *Skills* course is invaluable because it is different from other exam courses on the market, given that it covers a large proportion of worship and liturgy. Back in Girvan Scotland, Nicola Lawrence for one is glad she joined up for the *Skills* course. "I feel more confident; I never again have to say 'I'm not really an organist but....'" Alas, there's no unit yet in getting from one church to another on a Sunday morning.

For more information about the Church Music Skills programme, educational and music publications, and membership, go to www.rscm.com, telephone 01722 424848, write to the RSCM, 19 The Close, Salisbury, Wiltshire, SP1 2EB, UK, or email education@rscm.com.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS.

The Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) is an educational charity that promotes the best use of music in worship, church life, and the wider community. The RSCM also publishes music and training resources, and organises courses, short workshops and activities. With over 8,500 affiliates, members and friends in over 40 countries it is an international network, supported by over 750 volunteers and a small team of staff based throughout the UK. More at www.rscm.com.

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