

# AGO Professional Certification

## How to Pass the AGO Service Playing and Colleague Exams

Common misunderstandings and strategies for success

Friday, June 27, 2014 -1:00 p.m. - St. Botolph Room, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor 150

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### A. Service Playing Exam

- \$150. Discount available for full or part-time students- age 25 or under-- \$125 w/ ID
- Please note 2014 changes: Latest date to take the SP Exam is now March 31, with last applications due Feb. 1
- May be taken at any time (Oct. 1—March 31) and on any organ
- In the form of a Sunday morning service
- The purpose is to certify that the candidate is capable of a solid, dependable ability to play for church services.
- Exam strategy: choosing your repertoire
- Hymn playing
  - i. Legato
  - ii. Without slowing down at ends of stanzas
  - iii. Change the registrations between stanzas
  - iv. **Breathe** between stanzas
- Anthem accompaniment: choosing the right work
- Transposition
  - v. Explanation of SP Exam requirements
  - vi. Choose your hymn carefully
  - vii. Learn in advance/memorize
- Sight Reading
  - i. The SPC sight reading is on 2 staves
  - ii. Use your 60 seconds wisely
  - iii. Scanning the example: what to look for
  - iv. Tempo
  - v. To pedal or not to pedal?
- Never use illegal photocopies!

### Common SP Candidate Errors with Suggested Solutions

The following areas are common barriers to success.

1. Lack of preparation in transposition
  - Begin work on transposition immediately, practice daily.
  - Bear in mind that you can choose any hymn from the Examination Hymn Booklet for the transposition
  - Select a hymn that will allow you to succeed
    - i. Consider the key and its subsequent transpositions.

- ii. Consider the harmonic motion and number of accidentals.
  - iii. Take advantage of AGO materials: a number of excellent articles, tools, books, and DVDs are now available to help candidates; costs are nominal.
  - iv. Begin by writing out the transposition in all four keys.
  - v. It is even possible to memorize your four transpositions.
  - vi. On the day of the exam, think carefully before beginning to play; be certain you are in the right key.
- 2. Poor preparation of organ repertoire and/or lack of insight into the music
  - Don't go it alone!
  - It's a good idea to locate a teacher or a coach (possibly even one who has taken/passed the exam before).
  - If you don't have a teacher, ask trusted colleagues to evaluate your playing and provide constructive feedback.
  - Print out SP Exam "Manual of Procedure" from the AGO website, and study the grade sheet. In fact, *read the entire booklet carefully*. This will help you understand what the examiners are looking for- repertoire is graded on the following:
    - i. Note Accuracy
    - ii. Rhythm
    - iii. Tempo
    - iv. Registration
    - v. Awareness of stylistic period
    - vi. Phrasing and Articulation
    - vii. Musicality
  - The examiners always try to be as objective as possible
  - Bear in mind that: since the SPC candidate is allowed unlimited practice and registration time, and may use a familiar instrument, the examiners have higher standards for registration than they do for the CAGO candidate.
  - 50% of each individual section/70% overall = Pass
  - You will pass the exam if your performance demonstrates the ability to adequately perform/play for a Sunday morning service.
- 3. Registration of anthem accompaniments
  - Some candidates do not "register" the anthems
  - Select two anthems (from those on the Certification Requirements) that are manageable for you.
  - *Playing the right notes is assumed*; the candidate should register the anthem with sensitivity to the text, dynamics, choral resources, and the organ being used. For example, do not simply pull out the 8' strings, and play through the entire anthem.
  - Listen to recordings of excellent choirs, with your ear tuned especially to the organ. Observe how the organ functions in accompaniment.
  - Be creative with the idea that the organ is a full partner with the choir; the organ part is 50% of the success of any accompanied anthem. The organist is striving to make the accompaniment colorful, and balanced. The organ never overpowers the choir, yet it should not simply fade into the background either.

- Again, seek the assistance of an experienced musician to help you prepare a sensitive interpretation.

## **B. Colleague Exam** (\$200, \$175 per section if taken separately)

- Exam is offered twice annually, November and May
- Taking both sections simultaneously is more cost-effective.
- The student discount (same qualifications as SP Exam above) reduces the fees to \$150/\$125 for single section if taken separately.
- Several aspects of the exam make the CAGO slightly more challenging than the SPC exam
  - Exam may not be taken on an instrument where the candidate regularly practices or performs. Exam-specific practice time is allowed.
  - Transposition requirement is not a hymn from the EHB, rather a hymn-like 4-voice example composed specifically for the exam.
  - Some basic improvisation skills are tested.
  - The sight-reading is on 3 staves, rather than 2.
- The exam is organized in two sections: Organ repertoire and keyboard skills.
- Section 2 allows 20 minutes preparation time on a piano immediately prior to exam.
- All of the skills are manageable if properly prepared. You want your organ repertoire and hymns to be 100% solid so that you can focus on the Section 2 skills the day of the exam.

### CAGO Exam Strategy

- Immediately select your organ repertoire; one piece each from groups A,B,C in the Requirements
- Note that on the exam, it is not required to play the pieces in A,B,C order. Choose which one would work best as a “warm-up” so you get a strong start on the exam.
- It may seem obvious, but know that both the anthem and solo accompaniments as described in C2 & C3 must be played on the organ. The purpose is to test the candidate’s ability to adapt them successfully to the organ.
- Select your two hymns from the Examination hymn booklet. Choose two that you like and can play beautifully. Be creative in going beyond the very basic skills tested on the SPC exam. A few ideas:
  - Solo out the melody for the intro, or for one of the stanzas
  - If you solo out the melody, consider ornamenting it with a few passing tones or other embellishments that complement the style of the hymn.
  - Alter the harmony on the final stanza—you are allowed to use published material—but why not use published examples as a starting point and then improvise or compose your own?
  - Modulate up a half or whole step for final stanza (or begin a half/whole step lower if modulation up would be too high)
  - Develop an original introduction; but remember that extravagance is not always best. Establish the tempo, key, and tune without confusing the congregation!
  - The exam requires at least one verse to be played with pedal.

- Preparing your anthem & solo accompaniments
  - See comments above regarding anthem accompaniments.
  - Recorded examples: Poor, vs. adequate, vs. exceptional
- Section 2: Keyboard Skills
  - Become familiar with how to perform each option for C6 and C8. You may have a good idea of which option you “connect with,” and on the day of the exam, you have to choose one.
  - Since transposition is hard for many people, preparing diligently for C6 and C8 allows you to focus on the Transposition during the 20 minute preparation time.
  - To prepare for C6, consult a good hymnal, such as *The Hymnal 1982*, (or the Examination Hymn Booklet) and observe the harmony. I suggest looking at the following harmonizations from “H’ 1982” as good models
    - For C6a: 390, 432, 410
    - For C6b: 60, 162
    - For C6c: 711, 686, 676

### Common CAGO Candidate Errors with Suggested Solutions

1. Organ Repertoire: See comments above
2. Weak harmony on the C6 Keyboard Skills:
  - Harmonize your chosen example in the appropriate style.
    - i. C6a is a hymn tune: harmonize this in 4 parts, as a hymn is typically harmonized. Play 2 voices in the RH, one in the LH, and one in the feet. Follow good voice-leading rules. Avoid parallel octaves and fifths. Allow the harmonic motion to dictate how often your harmony should change.
    - ii. C6b is plainsong: harmonize this simply using chords that are within the mode of the chant tune. Avoid harmonizing every note. Two or three harmonies per phrase will usually suffice. Use first-inversion chords. Develop a strong cadential formula for the final cadence. Allow the shape of the melody to dictate where chord changes are necessary.
    - iii. C6c is a folk tune: Whether this suggests to you the simplicity of an early-American “singing school,” “shape-note,” or “Appalachian” folk melody or even a more contemporary type of “folk music,” this is in some ways the simplest option. Only simple harmony is required, in keeping with the melody. A harmony with many passing tones or harmonic shifts on every beat would not be appropriate here. It’s always a good idea to avoid obvious voice leading errors and parallels.
3. Transposition
  - Exam nerves result in a flustered state of mind
  - Candidate plays example in wrong key(s)
  - Transposition is not fluent
    - i. Daily practice necessary

- ii. Day of exam: Read the instructions carefully, and write down the two keys asked for on the exam. You are allowed to make any desired marks on the exam during the prep time.
- iii. Play the example several times in the original key to get the harmony in your ear.
- iv. Often transposition in one direction is harder for one candidate as opposed to another.
- v. Immediately examine accidentals and “translate” them into the new key. (The “natural” especially!)
- vi. Analyze the harmony in Roman numerals, which remain the same in every key
- vii. The melody and the bass are the most crucial voices.
- viii. It is always better to keep going despite the odd wrong note—a lack of fluency will affect the grade more than a wrong note.
- ix. Often a single chord can derail the ear or the hands under pressure. Identify this chord right away and make a note of it in both transposed keys. Memorize this.
- x. Use articles from AGO for more helpful hints on preparing transposition.

#### 4. C8 Improvisation Skills

- C8a & C8b are almost the same; the only difference is that C8b requires the candidate to use the given motif; C8a does not.
- C8c may prove to be the easiest choice; see article by Philip Gehring

#### **Common errors in C8:** with Demonstration

- i. C8a and C8b: Candidate does not establish the key
- ii. C8a and C8b: Candidate does not use pivot chords/tones and leading tones
- iii. C8a and C8b: Candidate harmony is too abrupt
- iv. C8 all: Candidate harmony is not smooth as a result of points ii and iii above
- v. Candidate loses direction and deviates from tonal centers
- vi. In C8b: Candidate loses use of the required motif
- vii. In C8b: Candidate does not transpose motif to new keys
- viii. Candidate does not demonstrate a meter
- ix. Candidate takes too long to complete exercise
  1. In C8a and C8b, by the time the key is established, one should begin the first modulation, and continue in this manner throughout. The example can be completed without adding a great deal of additional material.

### **AGO Educational Resources**

1. Copies of examinations from the previous five years are available for Colleague, Choir Master, Associate, and Fellow examinations. Administering these tests to yourself will give you an idea of what to expect on the current year’s tests.
2. Solution booklets with answers to all of the written questions of the AAGO, FAGO, and ChM examinations of the last five years are available.
3. Study Guides have been prepared for the Service Playing and Colleague tests. These will

lead you step by step to mastery of each skill.

4. “Preparing for AGO examinations”, a reprint of articles from The American Organist related to the Associate, Fellow, and Choirmaster examinations, gathers several useful essays under a single cover.

5. Ear Training CDs. FAGO, AAGO, and ChM examinations include dictation (writing down a passage of music after hearing it played several times). Since one can’t give oneself dictation, these CD’s are an excellent way to practice this skill.

6. Colleague repertoire is the subject of occasional articles in TAO, and they can be found on the Guild’s website in the “Professional Certification” section after the magazine’s publication date. These master lessons usually appear in late summer and fall of odd-numbered years, just after the new repertoire requirements for the CAGO examination have been announced.

7. Bibliography for Examination Preparation, prepared by the Committee on Professional Certification, lists a great number of sources for further study.

8. One hundred strategies for successful AGO Certification is a good collection of advice and information for those taking any of the exams. These resources are most effective, of course, when used in conjunction with lessons or workshops with an experienced teacher. But they can be used independently when no teacher is available.

### **Current, useful articles available in recent issues of TAO**

For CAGO Exam:

1. “AGO Colleague Examination/Holst and Handel Transcription Accompaniments” by David Enlow, FAGO, pp. 44-45, April 2014
2. “AGO Colleague Examination 2013/Improvisation Question/The Modulating Bridge” by Philip Gehring, FAGO, pp. 80-81, Oct. 2013; Correction shown on p.60 of Jan.2014.
3. “Helpful Hints for 2014 Colleague Exam Organ Repertoire” by Andrew Scanlon, FAGO, pp. 36, 38, 40, 42, 44, (Pierné, Jenkins, Vierne)
4. “Repertoire for the AGO Colleague Exam/Langlais’s Canzona” by Kathleen Thomerson, FAGO, ChM, pp. 42-43, June 2014.

For SPC:

1. “Two Additional Service Playing Test Anthems” by Joyce Shupe Kull, FAGO, ChM, p. 104, April 2006 (Mathias & Near).
2. “Two Additional Service Playing Test Pieces,” by Kathleen Thomerson, FAGO, ChM, October 2009, p. 42.
3. “AGO Service Playing Anthem Accompaniment/Thou Wilt Keep Him in Perfect Peace: Approaches to Wesley’s Most Popular Anthem” by Jonathan B. Hall, FAGO, ChM, pp. 46-47, August 2012.

For Both SPC and CAGO:

1. “Ten Tips on Sight Reading,” by Jonathan B. Hall, FAGO, March 2009, pp. 84-85.
2. “Transposition: Not a Four-Letter Word,” by Kenneth Grinnell, FAGO, May ‘08, p. 82.

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