

American Guild of Organists

# Certification Program

A Chapter Guide for Promotion, Preparation, and Participation



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# THE AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS

## CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

The AGO provides a system of examination and certification with a dual purpose: (1) To encourage a high standard of knowledge and performance among its members, and (2) To recognize the achievement of this standard by the awarding of certificates. These certificates are recognized and chartered through the AGO's original charter in the State of New York. Four levels, ranging from the modest demands of the Service Playing Certificate to the advanced demands of the Fellowship, are provided for organists. In addition, superior competence in choral conducting is recognized through the Choir Master Certificate.

The AGO was established for, and remains committed to, the advancement of organ music. It is not a church music organization, but since the majority of its members are church or synagogue organists, it seeks to assist its members in applying their art to the needs of their positions. The versatility required of the organist who serves the varied musical needs of a place of worship must be given importance equal to that of the performance of organ music in concert; indeed, at the SPC and CAGO levels, the musical needs of the church or temple service are stressed above the performance of concert literature. Even at the AAGO and FAGO levels, such skills as sight-reading, accompanying, and improvisation are included as essential skills for organists in the practice of their profession.

While the lower-level Guild examinations test competence in a number of skills that an organist uses regularly, such as hymn playing, accompanying, and sight-reading, the more advanced examinations also test the candidate's literacy and musicianship at a higher level. Items such as writing counterpoint in the style of Palestrina, accompanying from a figured bass, or answering questions on music history may not be considered useful in the practical sense, but they require a knowledge of the inner workings of music and its cultural context that are fundamental for the professional musician. Organists who aspire to the respect of their employers and their colleagues must

know more than how to play recitals.

The SPC and CAGO examinations consist entirely of performance; the tests for the higher, or academic, certificates are approximately equally divided between performance and written work. As to the performance examinations or the performance sections of the upper examinations, the candidate is expected to be competent in all aspects at the time of the examination. In this sense, the examination is like a recital, or perhaps like the musical part of a service of worship, where the organist is expected to perform each item creditably. For this reason, the AGO has insisted through most of its history that the candidate who gains an acceptable overall score but who fails one or two items of the test must retake the entire performance section in order to pass. The examinations are designed to test the candidate's ability to demonstrate mastery of all aspects of the organist's art on a given occasion, since this is the demand that is placed upon the professional musician. The examinations are not intended as opportunities to "stockpile" credits, as for instance might be the case in certain continuing education programs where public performance is not involved. [Candidates for the academic certificates may choose to take only one of the two sections, performance or paperwork, and to take the other section at a later time within a five-year period. But either section must be taken in its entirety.]

One hears the comment occasionally that Guild certification is an outdated enterprise—that when the Guild was founded, most church musicians did not have college or conservatory degrees and needed a means of certifying their professional competence. It is true that today, many leading organists hold university degrees in their field. However, many do not hold such degrees, and even the most advanced degrees in music often do not require the particular skills tested by the AGO examinations. Additionally, the high costs entailed in pursuing an upper-level degree deter many interested musicians. The Guild continues to offer the certification program in order to codify the skills peculiar to the organist's art, to establish a national standard toward which any teacher or institution can direct its efforts, and to provide a standardized credential for those who have proven

their abilities.

A summary follows of what the Guild considers to be the skills and knowledge appropriate to each level, and hence the items that should be included in each test.

## **Service Playing Certification (SPC)**

**FOR THE ORGANIST** who can meet the performance requirements of the typical service of worship.

1. Perform organ literature of modest difficulty.
2. Accompany a choral anthem.
3. Lead and accompany a congregational hymn and a psalm.
4. Sight-read a short passage of music on two staves.
5. Transpose a hymn, with advance preparation.

## **Colleague (CAGO)**

**FOR THE ORGANIST** of more advanced training and experience whose work demands a broader range of musical skills than that represented by the SPC test.

1. Perform organ literature of moderate difficulty.
2. Accompany a choral anthem and a vocal solo.
3. Lead and accompany a congregational hymn.
4. Sight-read a brief passage of organ music on three staves.
5. Harmonize a melody.
6. Transpose a hymn-like passage.
7. Improvise a simple interlude involving modulation.

## **Associate (AAGO)**

**FOR THE ORGANIST** who must meet high standards in a church, synagogue, or academic position, in solo performance, accompanying, and other keyboard skills, and who can demonstrate on paper and

at the keyboard a broad knowledge of music literature, history, and theory.

1. Perform major organ solo works of all periods.
2. Be familiar with major periods and styles of organ repertoire.
3. Understand organ history, design, and maintenance.
4. Harmonize melodies.
5. Play a hymn using an introduction and an interlude between two stanzas.
6. Accompany from figured bass.
7. Analyze musical form.
8. Sight-read choral open score (4-stave) and organ score (3-stave).
9. Transpose.
10. Improvise and compose in small forms.
11. Have knowledge of music literature and history, especially (but not limited to) organ and choral music and various traditions of liturgical music.
12. Transcribe from dictation.

## **Fellow (FAGO)**

**FOR LEADERS IN THE PROFESSION**, organists of superior ability and accomplishment who direct or participate in a comprehensive range of musical activity in church, synagogue, school, or public venue; who perform in solo recital and in concert; and who are called upon to demonstrate a variety of keyboard skills at a high level of competence, as well as a broad knowledge of music theory, history, and literature.

1. Perform organ literature of advanced difficulty.
2. Demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of organ repertoire.
3. Know and apply authentic performance practice.
4. Understand organ tonal design.
5. Apply authentic and effective registration.
6. Understand the mechanics and maintenance of the organ.
7. Accompany with flexibility and musicianship.
8. Sight-read open scores including lines in C clefs.

9. Transpose.
10. Improvise.
11. Compose and arrange.
12. Demonstrate practical knowledge of orchestration.
13. Have a broad knowledge of music history and literature.
14. Be able to write in contrapuntal forms of both 16th- and 18th-century styles, and to analyze examples.
15. Transcribe from dictation.

## **Choir Master (ChM)**

**FOR THE CHOIR DIRECTOR**, with emphasis on choral music in the worship service.

1. Rehearse and conduct a choir in standard choral literature.
2. Harmonize a melody at the keyboard.
3. Demonstrate basic keyboard skill and knowledge of chord progressions.
4. Transcribe from dictation and detect errors in a played passage.
5. Analyze form in choral music.
6. Show knowledge of Gregorian chant and its distinctive notation.
7. Demonstrate knowledge of hymnody and liturgy.
8. Articulate principles and guidelines for vocal training.
9. Be familiar with choral literature.
10. Show familiarity with music history and literature.

*The specific requirements for each year's examinations are published in the July issue of THE AMERICAN ORGANIST.*

## Ten Reasons to Become Certified

1. The Guild has provided a ready-made program for you to develop and improve your organ skills. Preparation for the exams strengthens you in areas that you use all the time: sight-reading, transposition, modulation, improvisation, accompaniment, and hymn playing.
2. Preparation is completely flexible. You can study on your own; you can work with a teacher; you can prepare as a group.
3. The certification process is anonymous and it is fair. No one needs to know anything about it except the one chapter member who makes the arrangements. With the exception of the Choir Master exam, the examiners never see you and don't know who you are. You could be a high school student or a college professor.
4. You will know exactly what will happen at the exam. All testing procedures are spelled out in detail for all participants in a Manual of Procedure.
5. Excellent preparation materials are available. Some are so good that you should get them even if you don't plan to take an exam. Copies of exams from previous years are available, allowing you to try your hand at a level similar to the one you will be taking.
6. You can repeat the exam as often as necessary. Many of those who have earned certificates did so on their second, third, or fourth try. Every exam you take makes the next one easier.
7. The cost is modest, especially when compared to university tuition. You can hire a coach to help you in your weaker areas, and still it is a bargain.
8. There are some attractive side benefits. Upon passing an examination, you will receive a certificate; your name will be published



in *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* along with those of other successful candidates; you can list letters after your name showing your achievement. You may even get a cash prize!

9. An increasing number of churches and schools are making use of the Guild's salary scales (see *The Work and Compensation of the Church Musician and Music in the Church: Work and Compensation*, listed in the resource pages of *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*). These guides, which are frequently updated on the AGO website <[www.agohq.org](http://www.agohq.org)>, call for higher salaries for musicians with Guild certificates.
10. The most important reason to become certified, of course, is that you will be a better organist and a better musician. The preparation will make you more skilled and confident. And the certificate will give you the respect of your employer and your peers, and a justified feeling of accomplishment.

# Setting Up Exam Preparation Classes in Your Chapter

*Updated and adapted from an article by Eleanor Hammer, Los Angeles Chapter,  
in THE AMERICAN ORGANIST, February, 1986.*

One way a chapter can encourage its members to participate in the AGO's educational work is to provide a series of classes, designed to prepare members to take one or more of the certification examinations. Classes cannot substitute for an adequate individual technique, but the activities of the class and the tangible encouragement demonstrated by the chapter seem to trigger the members into action. The number of people who elect to take an examination after the classes are over should not be the only measure of the success of the classes; those who participate will increase their skills, whether or not they become certificate candidates.

Individual areas, of course, have their individual problems, but the questions that follow are those most often asked by those planning to take certification classes. The suggested answers are based on the experience of several chapters that have offered classes; they are not in any sense "official doctrine," and each chapter may use them as circumstances dictate.

## **1. When shall we give the classes?**

For the Fellowship, Associateship, Choir Master, which are given in early June, spring is the logical time for classes, starting soon after Christmas. For those taking the Colleague exam in November and May, fall classes would be a necessity. For the Service Playing test, which can be taken any time from October 1 through April 30, classes could be scheduled accordingly. People should plan well in advance to take an exam, but they don't. As the time grows closer, the motivation becomes stronger. From eight to ten sessions seems to work best.

## **2. How often, what days, what times, where?**

Every other week is about right. Weekly sessions seem too con-

centrated; once a month allows momentum to be lost between meetings. Unfortunately, there is never a time to suit everybody. Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons may be the best time for many. Two and a half hours allows time for a brief intermission. Both a demonstration of a particular topic by the leader and some individual performances by class members can take place in one session. Where the classes are given is important. People like to work on a good organ; however, a large and complicated instrument may discourage those whose experience is limited. Such mundane factors as ease of parking, accessible transportation, and a cooperative institutional staff need consideration. An organ where class members can gather around the console is best. It is essential that interruptions be avoided.

### **3. Who pays for them?**

The money to pay for the classes can come from the sponsoring chapter, the participants, and any of a number of other sources. In some cases, Regional Councillors have funds available for this purpose. While any source can be used, the participants will get more out of it if they pay something. The leaders should be paid, of course, but not the organizer. That's AGO business, part of the volunteer activity we all do. The actual amounts will vary with individual situations. Payment in advance of the participants' fees is the best policy—allowing people to drop in at the last minute is not good.

### **4. What level (what certification exams) shall we prepare for?**

A decision as to which exam to prepare for is, of course, fundamental. While it might seem logical to start with the Service Playing, assuming that the greatest need might be there, people who need help before taking that exam tend to need more than can be given in a class format. The Colleague exam seems to be the level at which the motivating factor of a class situation works best. Most of the materials for that exam are easy enough to be reviewed and practiced by competent organists in the limited time we have suggested. Consequently, there should be a fairly large pool of members who might be interested.

As to the AAGO, FAGO, and ChM, the difficulty levels of these exams are such that individual skills play a much greater role in determining readiness. While the theoretical aspects of these three exams are ideal for college-level classes (perhaps available from a school in your area), the performance aspects are best studied individually with a teacher. There is also the practical limitation that there may not be enough chapter members ready and willing to tackle these challenges to make up a class. But in larger chapters, where there is a sufficient number of candidates, classes directed toward these examinations can certainly offer help and motivation.

#### **5. Who will be the leader or leaders?**

Selection of leader or leaders is, of course, most important. Having one person in charge centralizes the situation and is the most efficient, and also is the easiest for the coordinator to plan. Having different teachers allows participation by some teachers who could spare two Saturday mornings, but not ten. It has the drawback of wasting some class time through duplication of content. Someone with teaching experience is best; being a marvel at a particular skill does not always translate into effective communication. This is another reason for being sure the leader is paid. A volunteer may excuse a lack of teaching experience; someone who is being paid should not.

#### **6. What materials are to be used?**

The decision as to which exam will be covered affects the decision about materials. For the Colleague, the CAGO Study Guidelines can be purchased from national AGO Headquarters. A PDF document of the Examination Hymn Booklet may be obtained from the Certification Program Administrator (address on page 20). Each individual should have copies, so that the material can be worked on even if the class is not completed. Copies of previous years' tests are essential, and can be purchased from Headquarters. The repertoire of organ pieces in an exam is probably the last thing a class needs to be concerned with. Organists will practice their pieces, but they may resist practicing their transposi-

tion.

For a more complete list of materials, see page 12, *“To Help Candidates...”*

### **7. Do we admit auditors?**

Auditors should not be allowed. If someone is not capable of participating, coming to the class will do no good. Of course, people should not be embarrassed or pressured to play for the class if they are not ready. It might be good to make a sign-up sheet available at the beginning of each class in order to know who is ready to play.

### **8. Do we screen applicants, or do we accept all comers?**

We have not found it necessary to screen class members in advance. Usually, anyone who cannot keep up with a group drops out.

### **9. Who should do the overall planning?**

The coordinator should have detailed knowledge of the examination being administered. This knowledge is best derived from having personally taken the examination. This person will still need the help and advice of a committee. Depending on the local situation, officers of the local chapter or chapters may need to approve plans well in advance. A flier describing the sessions can be sent out with regular chapter mailings to save on postage. Sending copies to local colleges, churches, and non-AGO members is one way of publicizing the Guild's work. Included with the flier should be a registration form to be sent to the coordinator who can then order the materials for the class.

Toward the end of the sessions, trial runs of the examination items can be scheduled. Members should be encouraged to bring tape recorders and listen to their performances to give them a realistic evaluation of their readiness to take the exam.

## To Help Candidates In Their Preparation—Some Resources

The Guild offers a number of resources to help candidates prepare for the examinations. These are listed on the Educational Resources pages in the front section of each issue of *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* following “From the Executive Director.” They are also on the AGO website.

### Here is a short list:

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.

# When, Where, and Who: Basic Questions Answered

## When

### **SPRING**

Chapter officers and board make plans for encouraging members to become certified during the coming season, and for preparation classes and mentoring.

### **SUMMER**

Use chapter newsletter to stir interest in the certification examinations and to announce plans for preparation workshops and coaching. If your chapter is not regularly listed as an examination center for ChM, AAGO, and FAGO certificates, but would like to be, notify your Regional Councillor. Note list of requirements for each certificate, along with examination dates for the coming year in the July issue of *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*.

### **EARLY FALL**

Order preparation aids from Headquarters and/or publishers.

### **FIRST FALL MEETING**

Recognize any chapter members who have achieved certification during the last twelve months. Announce plans for classes and coaching.

### **JULY 1**

Earliest date for requesting application forms from Guild Headquarters, for SPC and CAGO (November exam date).

### **SEPTEMBER 15**

Completed application (with payment of fee) for CAGO (November exam date).

### **DECEMBER 1**

Earliest date for requesting application form for CAGO (May exam-



date).

### **JANUARY 1**

Earliest date for requesting application forms for ChM, AAGO, and FAGO.

### **MARCH 1**

Completed application (with payment of fee) for SPC and CAGO (May exam date).

### **APRIL 1**

Completed application (with payment of fee) ChM, AAGO, and FAGO must be received at Headquarters.

### **MAY/EARLY JUNE**

CAGO (spring), ChM, AAGO, and FAGO exams are administered. For exact dates, see the previous July issue of TAO.

## **Where**

### **SERVICE PLAYING TEST**

Any organ is permitted— even where the applicant usually plays.

### **COLLEAGUE TEST**

Must be taken on an unfamiliar organ. Three hours practice time will be provided.

### **ALL OTHER EXAMINATIONS**

Examination center (listed in the January issue of TAO). Note, however, that if the candidate is taking only Section 2 (paperwork tests) of the ChM, AAGO, or FAGO examinations, this may be done at any chapter.

## **Who**

**EACH CHAPTER OR EXAMINATION CENTER** where an examination is to be given must provide (1) an Examination Coordinator, who

makes the arrangements for a place to hold the exam and for the necessary equipment, and (2) one or two Proctors, who actually administer the examination. The details of their duties are spelled out in the Manual of Procedure, available from Headquarters. Examination Centers must also provide two Examiners for Section 1 (practical work/tests at the organ). The examiners must hold Guild certificates at least the equal of the exams being administered.

## Let the World Know!

Earning an AGO certificate is an important event, both for the successful candidate and for the congregation, school, or audience she or he serves. The candidate's chapter should make the most of the occasion, honoring the newly certified member and letting the public know about it. Here are some ideas.

- **RECOGNITION CEREMONY IN THE CHAPTER.** The chapter should schedule an appropriate recognition ceremony at a meeting or a public event soon after the list of successful candidates has been made public. For those whose examinations took place in early June, the appropriate time for recognition would be at the chapter's first fall meeting, when a substantial attendance is expected. It could be linked with the installation of the new chapter officers. For those who earn the Service Playing Certificate, the recognition could occur at any time during the season when a good attendance is expected. The minimum recognition would be an announcement and a spoken tribute by the chapter dean; some chapters may wish to be creative in their tributes.
- **NOTICE IN CHAPTER NEWSLETTER.** A paragraph or two in the chapter's newsletter can draw attention to the candidate's achievement. Include a thumbnail sketch of the member's position, training, and experience; mention any chapter offices held; and outline briefly what the test included (many AGO members don't know what is involved, and this is a good chance to inform them). One could also say—for examinations at all levels but especially for the FAGO, AAGO, and ChM—that the candidate “was one of only [get the number from Headquarters; it also will appear in the October issue of TAO] individuals nationwide to earn this certificate this year.”
- **STORY IN THE LOCAL DAILY NEWSPAPER.** The notice written for the chapter newsletter can be edited and submitted to the local newspaper, perhaps accompanied by a photograph. This story might include other facts of interest to the community: the

candidate's community affiliations and services, and day job (if not full-time in music). And add a short paragraph at the end, something like: "The \_\_\_\_\_ Chapter of the American Guild of Organists is a professional organization of \_\_\_\_\_ members, most of whom serve as organists and music directors in the churches [and synagogues] of the community. The AGO is a national organization of some 350 local chapters and 18,000 members." This will help to raise community awareness of our profession and its Guild.

- **RECITAL APPEARANCE.** The AAGO and the FAGO certificates attest to superior ability in organ performance, and it would be appropriate for the chapter to sponsor a recital, or at least a portion of one, by the successful candidate during the season following the examination. Again, this not only honors the member's achievement but also draws the community's attention to the Guild and the talents of its members. A similar event, such as a choral performance or a Guild service with choir, might be planned for someone who has earned the Choir Master certificate.
- **LETTER TO EMPLOYER.** A letter may be addressed to the member's employer, calling attention to the earning of a certificate. For the church or synagogue organist, the letter could be addressed to the pastor, rabbi, or cantor; for the academic musician, to the department chair or dean. It might read something like this:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

We are pleased to inform you that the American Guild of Organists has awarded the [Service Playing certificate] [Associateship certificate, with the designation "Associate of the American Guild of Organists" (AAGO)] to Mary Doe. The certificate was earned by a comprehensive examination in organ playing [choral conducting], church music, and allied arts. This distinction bears witness to Ms. Doe's superior knowledge and talent, and to her skill in applying her gifts to her work as organist [choir director, music director].

I know that you will want to join me in congratulating Ms. Doe on the achievement of this professional distinction.

Sincerely yours,

\_\_\_\_\_, Dean

\_\_\_\_\_ Chapter, American Guild of Organists

For those who are part-time musicians, a letter could be addressed to their employer in whatever field their work may lie. A Guild certificate attests to ambition and achievement, even if it is not in the area of their non-music work. Employers like to know about such honors.

- **CELEBRATE!** At the very least, or in addition to all of the above, plan a party in honor of the certificate holder.

# Whom to Call

## Application

Notify your chapter dean that you are interested in becoming a candidate for one of the Guild certificates.

For application forms and information about the application procedure, contact:

Paul Wolfe, *Certification Program Administrator*  
American Guild of Organists  
475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1260  
New York, NY 10115  
Phone: 212-870-2311, ext. 4303  
Fax: 212-870-2163  
E-mail: [exams@agohq.org](mailto:exams@agohq.org)

## Questions about the examinations

Refer first to your Chapter or Regional Educational Coordinator. For either coordinator contact information, please check the Guild's website <[www.agohq.org](http://www.agohq.org)> or call the Headquarters number.

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