

Chorister Badge Awards – Light Blue Badge

This article explains exactly what a chorister has to learn in order to be able to be awarded a Light Blue badge. As each chorister discovers, these are not handed out like sweets! Much study has to be undertaken in order to achieve the coveted ribbon and, in recognition of such achievement, each badge level carries the incentive of a pay rise.

St Faith's choir participates in a badge scheme run by the Royal School of Church Music (RSCM). There are different badge levels for the choristers to work towards. Although there has been a new preparatory white ribbon introduced recently, our choristers study for their first RSCM badge on a Light Blue ribbon. This can take choristers up to eighteen months to attain. Training is given for 20 minutes before each choir practice.

In music there is no space or time to write long instructions as to how to perform a piece. So everything is in a kind of 'code' that all probationers (new choristers) have to understand. Various signs, symbols and shortened forms of words have to be learnt. This is made more difficult because all instructions are in Italian. So between *ff* or *fortissimo* (very loud) and *pp* or *pianissimo* (very quiet) there are grades of dynamics – *f*, *mf*, *mp* and *p*. Choristers have to learn these Italian words, their meaning and their shortened form or 'code'. Besides being told how loudly or quietly to sing, there are other Italian words with their shortened forms and symbols that instruct singers to get gradually louder – *crescendo*, *cres.*, to get gradually quieter – *diminuendo*, *dim.*, to slow down – *rallentando* or *rall.*, or to speed up – *accelerando* or *accel.* Other signs and symbols instruct singers to repeat a section, to go back to the beginning – *da capo*, to go back to the sign – *DS*, or to finish – *fine*.

In addition to the above instructions as how to perform a piece, choristers have to learn to 'read' music. Music is written on five lines called a *stave*. At the beginning is a *clef* that governs the pitch of each note. *Clef* is French for 'key' and a *treble clef* or *G clef* 'unlocks' or fixes the second line up as note G. This is the clef that choristers, sopranos and altos sing from, and that pianists generally play with their right hand. Choristers have to learn the letter names of the lines and spaces in the treble clef. They also have to learn the different note shapes and their names – *semibreve*, *dotted minim*, *minim*, *crotchet* and *quaver*. They have to know how long each note lasts, and the *rests* (or silences in music) that match each note.

Choristers learn that music is divided into *bars* separated by *bar-lines*. At the end of a piece is a *double bar-line*, the equivalent of a full stop in reading. There are *time signatures* at the beginning of each piece of music that tell how many beats there are in each bar (2, 3 or 4) and what kind of beat or pulse the music is written in e.g., *crotchets* or *minims*.

Then there are other symbols – *#*'s (sharps) and *b*'s (flats). Choristers have to learn about *semitones* in order to be able to understand that a *#* raises a note by a semitone and a *b* lowers a note by a semitone. They also have to know the difference between *tones* and *semitones* because they have to be able to construct a *major scale*. Lastly they learn about *key signatures*, the *#*'s and *b*'s at the beginning of a piece of music that denote what key – or scale – the music is written in.

In addition to all this theoretical knowledge, there are the singing and aural requirements of the badge. Choristers have to be able to sustain notes, to sing with a good tone and clear diction. They have to learn where to breathe in the music. They have to sing an ascending and descending major scale – unaccompanied. They have to sight-read a rhythm and a melody, clap a simple rhythm back and sing a simple melody back. They have to be able to listen to a piece of music and say whether it has two or three beats in a bar.

When seeing a piece for the first time, a chorister has to learn where the information relating to the composer and the lyricist is to be found – their dates of birth and death and what century they lived in. They have to be able to recognise where the words come from – e.g., Bible or prayer book and to talk about the mood and meaning of the piece. They also have to have an understanding of the times and seasons of the Church's year. Regular attendance is another important part of the badge scheme as is a chorister's behaviour.

It can clearly be seen that the depth of knowledge and understanding is huge for any probationer to undertake. With the help of self-test cards and worksheets the syllabus is eventually covered and the two test papers are handed out. There is a set pass mark to achieve and sometimes choristers have to re-take a paper. So it is with great pride and a real sense of achievement that a chorister is awarded their Light Blue badge in front of the whole congregation. Every chorister at each badge level strives to live up to this RSCM motto;

"I will sing with the Spirit and I will sing with the understanding also."

Sylvia Willey – Organist & Choir Director

Chorister Badge Awards – Dark Blue Badge

The previous article in *"Faith Matters"* (April 2010) explained the amount and depth of knowledge a chorister requires in order to be awarded a Light Blue ribbon in the Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) badge scheme. As the April article explained, in music there is no time to write down long instructions as to how to perform a piece. All instructions are in a kind of 'code' and take the form of various signs, symbols and shortened forms of Italian words – all of which a chorister has to learn and understand.

This article deals with the next level – the Dark Blue ribbon. This builds on the foundations laid down in the previous badge as choristers expand their knowledge of things theoretical. To the *semibreve*, *dotted minim*, *minim*, *crotchet* and *quaver* notes are added the *breve* and *semiquaver* together with their rests. However, all these notes can also be written as *dotted notes*, so these and their rests have to be learnt too. There are rules as to how to write these notes down correctly and choristers learn how to *beam* (or *join*) these notes together properly. Into this notational mix is added the difference between *slurs* and *ties*, *staccato* and *legato*, their meanings, how they are written down and recognised in the music. More signs, symbols and shortened forms of Italian words are studied in greater depth, as it is these important instructions that inform singers how the composer wishes the music to be performed.

A new clef – the *bass clef* (or *F clef*) – is included at this level. This is the clef that tenors and basses use and that pianists generally play with their left hand. Choristers have to learn the new letter names of the lines and spaces in this clef. Also included is a wider range of *major scales*

that, together with their *relative minors* and associated *key signatures*, present quite a challenge. Various humorous mnemonics have been devised to help in the learning of these! Having learnt how to construct a major scale in the previous badge, choristers now have to be able to write down (or construct) a *harmonic minor* scale.

The aural requirements of this badge level link with the theoretical requirements outlined above. Choristers have to recognise the *intervals* of a *major 3rd*, *minor 3rd*, *perfect 4th*, *5th* and *octave* in the music they sing, they have to be able to write these down, to be able to sing them and identify them when played. They also have to know the difference between *chords* and *triads*, and distinguish between *major* and *minor triads* when hearing them. Choristers have to sing a harmonic minor scale and one verse of a hymn, unaccompanied, with resonance and even tone, in tune and with good breathing and diction. They have to sight-sing a melody that includes leaps and dotted notes, sing back a tune played to them, clap back a rhythm that includes dotted notes and be able to say whether the pulse of a piece of music is in 2, 3 or 4 time.

When being presented with a new piece of music, choristers have to know where to find information relating to the composer and lyricist. They have to discover what other works the composer has written. Choristers also have to recognise where the words have come from (e.g., Prayer Book, Eucharist or Bible) and be able to give the meaning of the text and know what language the lyrics have been written in. In addition they have to say what service or season of the church's year the work is intended for and

how the mood of the music reflects that. A simple musical analysis of the piece also has to be given.

Regular attendance, punctuality and the ability to be a good team member is an essential requirement at all levels of badge-work, as is good behaviour and the ability to remain focussed in rehearsals and services. As this article shows, progress towards the award of a Dark Blue ribbon requires a greater depth of knowledge and is consequently more challenging for the choristers. Those who successfully pass the two test papers can, therefore, take pride in being awarded their badge at the Sunday morning service.

Sylvia Willey – Organist & Choir Director

Chorister Badge Awards – Red Badge

In the April and May issues of “Faith Matters” 2010, the various singing and theoretical requirements of the RSCM Light Blue ribbon and Dark Blue ribbon were explained. This article deals with the challenges faced when starting out on the Red Badge level.

All **theoretical requirements** are now studied in greater depth. To the notes already known is added the *demi-semiquaver* and its *rest*. Notes that are higher or lower than the stave are written on extra small lines called *ledger lines*, and these have to be learnt in both *treble* and

2 3 4 C	C 2 3 4	6 9 12
4 4 4	2 2 2	8 8 8

The **aural and singing requirements** at this level are quite extensive. Choristers have to be able to recognise, sing and name all three notes of both major and minor triads. They have to be able to identify major, minor and perfect intervals when played, recognise them in music, and be able to sing them too. Besides singing ascending and descending major and minor scales in various keys, they now have to be able to sing major and minor arpeggios and be able to name the notes that they have sung. When a chord is played, choristers have to sing and name any note in that chord. Sight singing is still important at this stage and, when faced with an unfamiliar piece of music, choristers have to explain the time signature and identify the key signature (and its relative minor). The pitch of any note in the first chord has to be identified. This unseen choral piece can be in simple or compound time and in any key up to, and including, five sharps and flats. It can include dotted notes, rests and tied notes, and will contain various Italian terms that the choristers have to observe in their singing. Good tone and diction are important, as is breathing in appropriate places. Choristers have to explain the difference between choral and solo singing and, in order to be awarded their red badge, have to sing a solo either in a concert or in a service.

bass clefs. Dotted notes and rests are revised and extended and *key signatures* – in both major and relative minors – now include up to *five sharps and five flats*. A wider variety of *Italian words* that tell singers how to perform the music now have to be learnt. The two different sorts of time – *simple and compound time* – always confuse choristers at first, but with clapping games, aural work, practice cards and repetition, eventually the penny drops and “Oh! Now I get it”, is music to the trainer’s ears! At this level the following time signatures should be understood:

In the **repertoire section**, singers have to know who wrote the music and when, who wrote the text and when and the source of the words. Dates of birth and death of both composer and librettist and the century they lived in have to be given. Choristers have to surmise if the music was written for a special event or time of the year and if it was commissioned. They also have to say how the composer matches the mood of the words and reflects this in the music.

The **choir routine section** is equally important as all the above and records whether choristers are committed, reliable and punctual, whether they lead by example and are willing to help younger members without any fuss.

The red badge level is a big “ask” for any choir member to undertake, and awarding the ribbon at the 9.30 Sunday morning service is an important part of their choir membership and the result of some very hard work.

Sylvia Willey – Organist & Choir Director

