

The RSCM Church Music Skills programme

The RSCM Church Music Skills programme (Skills for short) is arguably the most comprehensive course to provide in-service training for church musicians.

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 StudyScheme 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 need for the Church Music Skills programme 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."