

THE DEARTH OF ORGANISTS

Many readers will have first-hand experience of the present dearth of organists. Many more will realize that the musical standard which obtains in many of our churches could be improved. The causes of this state of affairs are complex and not capable of instant remedy.

The Scottish Association for Church Music was founded recently in the belief that a sustained effort should be made to improve matters. The Association is not tied to a single denomination, but hopes to make a very strong impact on the musical life of the Church of Scotland. The Chairman is Mr George McPhee, Master of the Music at Paisley Abbey. Wider plans are under consideration, but I am here going to outline the prototype of a course for organists which has been the Association's first venture.

The designers of the course had no thought of preparing pupils to cope with the peaks of the solo organ repertory, or with instruments of English cathedral dimensions. We hoped to initiate our pupils into the secrets of organ-playing to the extent that they could supply good leadership of congregational singing, and provide organ music at other points in the service.

Our aim was to attract those already holding posts as church organists, and the course was advertised in the Presbytery of Glasgow and in the adjoining Presbyteries of Hamilton, Paisley and Dunbarton. Not everyone who enrolled fitted precisely into our target group, but, as we hoped, the majority had the keyboard facility which piano lessons give; in many cases our volunteers had been persuaded to take on the job of organist in the absence of a "proper" organist. Thus, the areas which demanded attention were registration, pedalling and the various differences between the keyboard techniques appropriate to the piano and the organ. These areas were studied with particular reference to hymns, since it is in the playing for congregational singing that an organist can most decisively make his or her mark (for good or ill) in services in the Presbyterian tradition. Some attention was also given to the selection of organ music appropriate to particular occasions, and to some basic aspects of choir-training.

A mixture of plenary and small-group meetings ("lectures" and "tutorials") was offered, in the belief that while there are many topics which can be dealt with in a large company ("What does Principal 4' mean?"), there are others in which an organist requires more individual tuition ("It's more effective to articulate that repeated E flat in the top part more vigorously"). Meetings were held in churches other than the central venue, so that several small-group sessions could take place simultaneously, and so that more than a single instrument could be seen at close quarters.

The course has now been held twice: from April to June 1982 in Jordanhill Parish Church, and over the equivalent ten Saturday mornings in 1983 in Stepps Parish Church. A crucial aspect of the choice of central venue was the character of the organ: it had to have a direct, responsive action, such that pupils who learned to exploit it could get the better of any other mechanism they might encounter; it had to have at least one complete chorus. The organ had to be housed in a building in which no long reverberation could cloud the consequences of the players' efforts.

Between twenty and thirty organists have now benefited from the course. One or two found that their church was prepared to pay the fee of £20 for the course on their behalf. A few are taking organ studies further on a private basis.

Several branches of church music could form the subject of follow-up courses - solo organ music and its place in the service, or in the church year, the repertory for church choirs of various sizes and constitutions, and so on. But the prototype course appears to meet a need, and could well be repeated - and not just for those within travelling distance of Glasgow.

Further information, including details of membership of the Scottish Association for Church Music, is available from the Secretary: Mr William Hume, c/o, McLeish, Thomson & Co., 8, Buchanan Street, Glasgow G1 3LL.

STUART CAMPBELL
University of Glasgow.