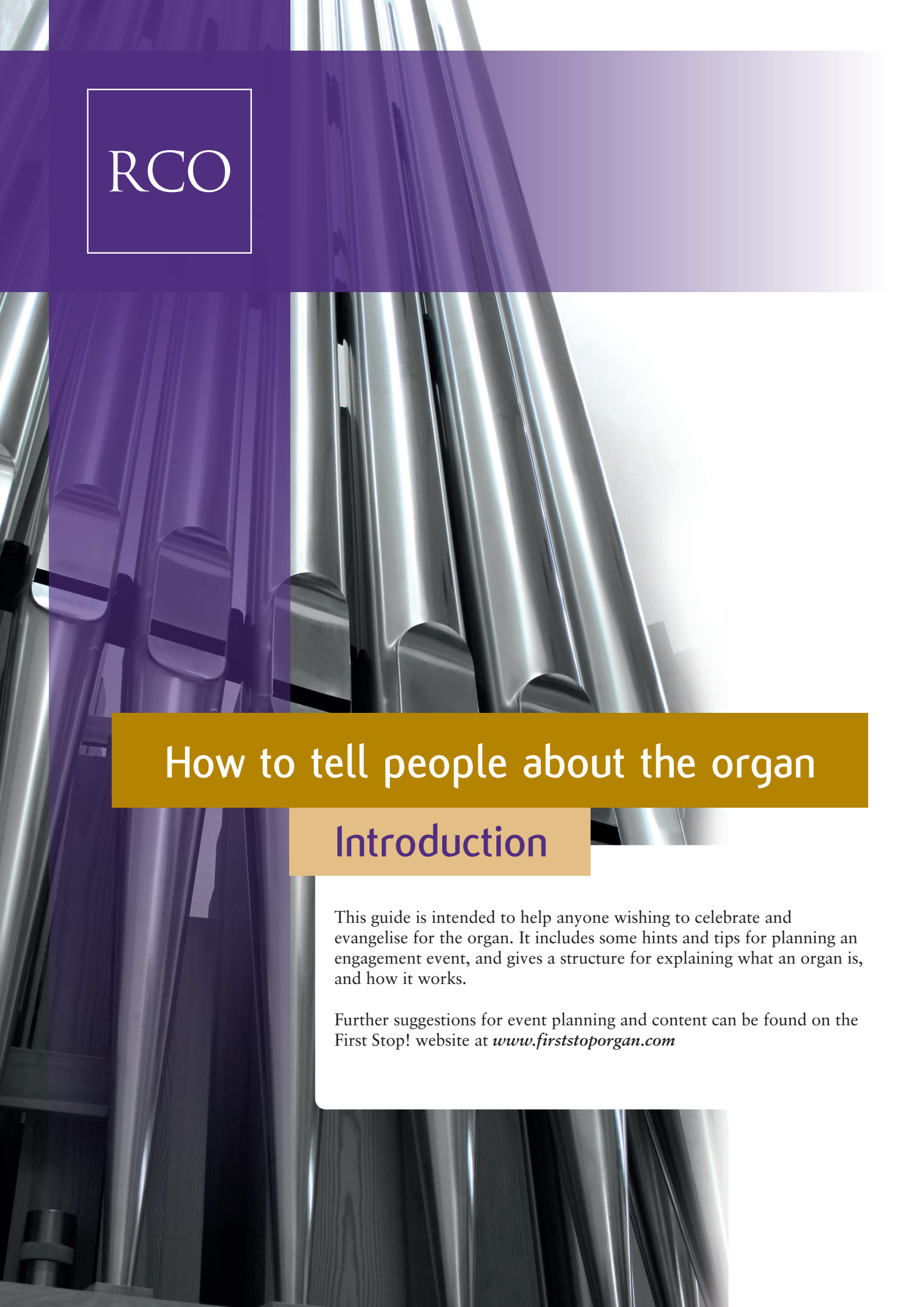

RCO

How to tell people about the organ

Introduction

This guide is intended to help anyone wishing to celebrate and evangelise for the organ. It includes some hints and tips for planning an engagement event, and gives a structure for explaining what an organ is, and how it works.

Further suggestions for event planning and content can be found on the First Stop! website at ***www.firststoporgan.com***

Planning an Event

Many different kind of events can be used to promote the organ to a wider audience, from a hands-on come-and-play session to a specially tailored performance.

While it is impossible to cover all aspects of event planning, the following ten tips will generally stand you in good stead. And there are plenty more resources - such as a film called *Planning an Introduction to the Organ workshop* - on the First Stop! website at ***www.firststoporgan.com***.

1. **Start with your content:** Think through carefully how you plan to introduce people to the organ; perhaps write a script and rehearse it. Consider whether there are any external resources you might draw on (those RCO YouTube videos, for example, include Andrew Cantrill's excellent Introduction to the Pipe Organ film which could run before or during any breaks in your event, or simply act as inspiration for your own presentation).
2. **Don't be over-optimistic with the timetable:** keep it simple, and stick to it.
3. **Don't overload people with information:** organists can often be knowledgeable and enthusiastic – which is a good thing! But, as with the timetable, it pays with event planning to keep your day as simple as you can.
4. **Promote, promote, promote:** look for every opportunity to promote your event, and give yourself sufficient time to get the word out! There are plenty of options, from social media and your diocesan / parish channels (including their websites and social media accounts) to local news outlets, schools, local groups, local music and music education organisations, and more.
5. **Best foot forward:** first impressions count, and a clean and tidy venue (including around the organ console!), and generous amounts of quality refreshments can make a big difference.
6. **Have plenty of help:** make sure you have people to act as welcomers, tea-makers, stewards. Take care to match the skills of your volunteers with the jobs you give to them. Don't forget the help needed before the event too: help with design and publicity, safeguarding, and health & safety.
7. **Focus on MUSIC above all:** this document provides some ideas for presenting clearly the workings of a pipe organ, but whilst this is a key part of any introduction to the organ, remember that it is a musical instrument and not a machine. Point people towards music at every opportunity, and think through what music one might use to demonstrate the various sounds of the organ etc
8. **Allow people to explore for themselves:** have a Q&A; include an Orgelkids or WOOFYT workshop in your day (search online for details of both); and give attendees the opportunity to try the organ for themselves.
9. **Give people something to go away with:** be as creative, but relevant, as you like. Remember this can be something as simple as a good handout leaflet (such as the International Organ Day 'Discover more' leaflet, available from the RCO), pointing out places to go to hear quality organ concerts, live and online. Point people towards places where they can learn more about the organ (such as the RCO YouTube channel), or arrange some starter lessons.
10. **Finish on time!**

Explaining the Organ

The following outline draws on an existing and successful format for young people (that of the Organworks project). The basic structure is suitable for adults, and children of all but the youngest of ages; differences in tone and precise details must be judged according to the intended audience.

These ideas could be employed as a segment of a larger event, but note that they could also be used simply as the basis for describing the organ one-to-one, to an interested individual.

- If possible, **make sure the console is visible** for people to explore a little before the presentation begins.
- Upon starting, and after a short welcome, the first thing to do is to **allow people to hear the instrument**: a short but arresting opening piece, perhaps something immediately familiar like the *Bach Toccata in D Minor BWV 565i*.
- [At this point, and if it is worth doing so (see below), **switch the organ off**.]
- Discuss briefly the context and history of the organ. This must be short, so restrict yourself to: the fact the history of the organ can be traced back to Ancient Greece; that organs are still made today (and, how old is the organ in the event venue?); the range of materials found within an organ (different metals and woods, leather, electrical components); that organs are found in churches, concert halls, sports stadia, ballrooms, palaces, private homes etc
- Commence your description of how the organ works by speaking about the ***winding*** of the organ: the **blower**, which is like a vacuum cleaner operating in reverse, which feeds the **bellows**, the organs lungs. At this point – if the effect is audible in the venue – switch the organ on, allowing people to hear the instrument 'inhale'.
- Compare the capacity of the organs lungs with our own: children might enjoy a 'who can sing the longest' singing competition with the organ. The organ will win of course, but much amusement will ensue if the organist cheats by sticking a pencil in the keys and walks away!
- Introduce the **pipes**, through which air passes to produce sound. (Demonstration pipes of differing size, shape and material to pass around are handy at this point, if possible).
- A guessing game concerning the number of pipes in the organ can be effective. The answer usually surprises people, even with a small instrument.
- Move on to a discussion of **pitch**. Will a short pipe sound lower or higher than a long pipe? Play the lowest and highest pitches the organ possesses.
- Demonstrate the various **families of tone**: Principals, Strings, Reeds, Flutes. A mnemonic can be fun, for example "Primary School Rules Forever". Have distinct short demonstration music for each family, for example: a hymn tune for the principals, ethereal chords for the strings, a fanfare for the reeds, something more playful for the flutes.
- **How is all this played?** This is the moment to talk more about the keyboards, the pedals (people love to see a pedal solo…), the stops, and perhaps other features such as the swell box.
- Allow time for people to ask **questions** before…
- …wrapping up with a short **final piece.**

Final Thoughts

There are so many ways you can build on this basic framework.

Devising listening games can be good, for example asking children to identify the families of sounds as you play on them.

Find ways to relate parts of the organ to people's wider everyday experience. Describing the blower as a 'backwards vacuum cleaner' is an example of this. When dealing with children, one can ask: if you spill biscuit crumbs on a carpet, what do you need? Discussion of the correct answer (a hoover/vacuum cleaner) allows one to introduce the concept of the blower. Don't forget to point out that, if used around the house, the organ blower would rapidly distribute the biscuit crumbs *everywhere*!

If you are catering for very young children, for example Reception age classes from a school, most/all technical detail will be unhelpful. Far better in this instance to focus on engagement with the noises the organ makes.Ask children to name (for example) colours, animals or emotions, and respond by finding sounds/improvising music on the organ which corresponds to these. Be prepared to have to find distinct sounds for lots of big cats…lion, tiger, cheetah, leopard, jaguar, puma (it is amazing how many big cats a group of five-year-olds may know of…the writer speaks from experience…)

For further advice or questions on the content of this leaflet, please contact RCO regional director Tom Bell in the first instance, on tom.bell@rco.org.uk

Thank you for your interest in celebrating and promoting the organ to new audiences. The very best of luck with your event!