03 Advice on running Play the Organ workshops

A. Venue and instrument

Choose a venue with an instrument which is in good condition, in tune and which sounds well in the room. The instrument need not be large but ideally will have at least two manuals and pedals, with the console easily visible and accessible. Comfortable seating and temperature with access to toilets and a kitchen are highly desirable.

B. Planning your event

Enlist others to help you plan and present the event. Your local organists' association may be interested in being involved. Visit iao.org.uk/associations for a list of associations and contact details. On the day you will need people to act as welcomers, tea-makers, and stewards. Take care to match the skills of your volunteers with the jobs you give them.

Don't forget the help needed on matters such as safeguarding, insurance, and health & safety. Please see our separate guidance sheet, *06 Safeguarding, health & safety, and insurance*, and be mindful that the Royal College of Organists and its Play the Organ Year partner organisations cannot take responsibility for your provision in these respects, nor for any incidents associated with your event.

C. Promotion

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.

Templates for posters as well as information sheets and event follow ups can be found in our resource pack at www.rco.org.uk/play.

D. On the day

First impressions count, so check that the venue is clean and tidy (including around the organ console!). Providing generous amounts of simple refreshments also can make a big difference.

Seat the participants as close to the console as possible or where they can see images of it and the player projected on to a screen (in this latter case, you may need two presenters, one to play and one to speak).

E. Event programme

The following is a tried and tested format to copy or adapt. The demonstration part usually takes 30–40 minutes with extra time required for the 'have-a-go' element. Don't overload people with information—have a timetable and stick to it. When imparting information consider asking questions from time to time rather than simply explaining.

- Play a well-known and arresting short piece such as Bach's *Toccata in D minor BWV 565*.
- Surreptitiously turn the organ off.
- Invite someone from the group to try playing and gradually explain what is needed to create sound on the organ.
    - Wind, obtained by turning on power to the blower
    - Pulling out a stop to allow wind to access the pipes controlled by that stop
    - Using the keyboard/pedals associated with the pipes of the chosen stop
- Describe the different families of pipes using attractive and short excerpts of music to demonstrate them. If you have access to some old pipes (your organ tuner or a local organ builder may be able to provide these), you can easily show how sound is created by flue and reed pipes and what happens when a pipe has a stopper in its end. You can also talk briefly about the materials from which the pipes are made.
    - Flue stops: principals/diapasons; flutes; strings
    - Reed stops, loud and soft
- Combining stops: what the numbers on the stop heads/tabs signify and how a chorus is built up (8', add 4', add 2', add Mixture…), perhaps using a hymn tune to demonstrate the build-up.
- Play something on the pedals alone – people love to see the feet in action!

- Now is a good time to let those who wish to do so try playing. Those who play other keyboard instruments can try out a piece they already play (for pianists, Baroque and Classical styles usually work best). Those who don't have any prior keyboard, or even musical experience, can be encouraged to improvise, perhaps on the pentatonic scale formed by using the black keys. Children can be encouraged to improvise in twos or even threes, using different manuals and with slow moving notes in the pedals for alternating feet. We have produced *My First Encounter* guidance sheets designed to get people playing whether or not they have any prior musical experience.
- Wrap-up with a short, impressive piece.
- Give people something to take away:
    - This can be as simple as a good leaflet, such as *07 Exploring further* in the Play the Organ Year resource pack
    - Our Play the Organ Year branded templates, available on the website resource area, allow you to design your own hand-outs
    - Point people towards places where they can learn more about the organ (such as the RCO YouTube channel at **www.youtube.com/rcofilms**)
    - Why not arrange a taster organ lesson with a local teacher, or via **www.rco.org.uk/organteachers**

F. Important – let us know how you got on!

We want to share the organ with a record number of people in 2025, so it's vital that as a Play the Organ Year event organiser, you let us know how you got on.

You can simply let us know how many people heard the organ (at a First Encounter recital) or got a chance to play it (at a Play the Organ session). Or, even better, you could take and send some photos of people at the organ console (following safeguarding rules if appropriate: in the UK this means that you first ask the permission of the parent/guardians of those aged under 18, offering to take only a back view if preferred). Ask your participants for their thoughts on the experience, and of course share your own.

You can email all of this to us at **play@rco.org.uk** or visit our website at **www.rco.org.uk/play** to complete the feedback form you will find there.