04 First Encounter Organ concerts: Planning for success

This guidance sheet contains general advice on how to organise a successful *First Encounter* concert to introduce newcomers to the organ and its music. For smaller introductory sessions, please see our advice sheets *02 Introducing individuals to the organ* and *03 Running Play the Organ workshops*.

A. Organ and venue

Choose a venue, whether secular or sacred, with an instrument which is in good condition and which sounds well in the room. The building itself should be easily accessible, ideally with as many of these attributes as possible: car parking and public transport links; warm and with comfortable seating; toilet facilities and the wherewithal to provide refreshments.

The organ console should be visible to all audience members either through direct line of sight or by setting up a camera and screen.

A camera inside the organ can be useful in addition to those on the player but make sure you have permission to enter the organ and that the camera operator can do so safely.

Check well in advance of the event that the technology is working.

B. Your team

Planning and delivering a *First Encounter* concert will inevitably be a team effort. You may have a ready-made team at your chosen venue, or you may wish to contact your local organists' association to discuss the idea. Visit **iao.org.uk/associations** for contact details.

C. Publicity

Print is still effective and need not be expensively designed but must look as if some thought and care has gone into it. Editable PTOY templates are available on our website to help you produce branded posters, programmes and information sheets.

Publicity via websites, social media, email also needs care. Social media can be used to build interest in the lead up to the event, with successive posts adding new and enticing information.

Direct publicity can be very effective, for instance to local schools and piano teachers. You may need to reassure piano teachers that the intention is to allow their students to experience another keyboard instrument, that there is no intention of poaching students, and that organ playing can enhance rather than harm piano technique.

All publicity needs to give people a clear idea of what to expect and to be open and inclusive.

D. Content and delivery

Decide how long your concert should last, remembering that it is always better to leave people wanting more!

Wherever possible offer audience members the chance to try playing the organ at the end, however briefly, and factor this into the timings.

Choose repertoire which will capture and hold a novice audience's attention and which demonstrates the range of sounds an organ can create, bearing in mind the likely age range of your audience. Shorter pieces (or extracts from longer ones) are usually best.

Include some repertoire which is likely to be familiar (Bach's *Toccata in D minor BWV 565*, arrangements of film and TV themes and the like). See our guidance sheet *05 First Encounter repertoire and programming* advice for more ideas.

Carefully prepared and well delivered spoken introductions, including information about how the organ works, how it is played and about the chosen music, are all but essential, but do not overload your audience.

Well written, concise and non-specialist programme notes can be very useful. These can contain information, both specific and more general, about the organ, as well as about the music to be played. Play the Organ Year-branded templates are available in the resources area.

Consider including short performances from one or two organ students in the concert (perhaps a child and an adult) thus suggesting to audience members that they themselves could learn to play.

Can you offer audience members who have never played an organ the chance to do so, probably at the end of the concert? If it is not possible to do this, be available to talk informally to audience members and aim to have free *Play the Organ* sessions available to book at nearby venues as soon afterwards as possible. It is not necessary to have extensive teaching experience to do this as we have produced guidance sheets to help you deliver these.

For more detailed programming advice don't forget that advice sheet, *05 First Encounter repertoire and programming advice*, available to download at **www.rco.org.uk/play**.

E. Resources

Having some pipes to blow and talk about during introductions to the pieces in the concert programme can bring things alive. The venue's organ tuner or a local organ builder may be able to provide these.

The Orgelkids organ demonstration kit (**www.orgelkidsuk.org** and **www.orgelkids.nl/en**) can be very useful for breakout sessions, especially in presentations to schools or at 'have-a-go' follow-up sessions. These are not cheap to buy but there are a few available in UK for hire. Woofyt (Wooden-One-Octave- Organ-For-Young-Technologists) workshops are also a fun way to introduce people to how the organ works. See **www.woofyt.org/**.

F. On the day

Decide how many people you need to assist you and choose the right people for the right job. Don't try and do everything yourself, especially if you are the player/presenter.

Stewards should give everyone a warm welcome and should know about all the details of the venue and the event content and schedule.

Where possible provide refreshments, perhaps on arrival, during a break or at the end of the event.

Have well-presented follow-up materials available, using our Play the Organ Year templates if you wish to make your own. These might include:

- Information about where to hear more organ music locally and online.

- Information on how to find an organ teacher, including the Royal College of Organists' Find a Teacher service at **www.rco.org.uk/organteachers**.
- Our guidance sheet *07 Exploring further*.

G. Safeguarding, health & safety and insurance

These are vitally important subjects which you must consider when planning and running your event.

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.

H. Funding your event

If you wish to attract an audience for your event you will probably not be able to charge for attendance. It may, however, be worth providing the option to book a free ticket in advance through an online service such as Eventbrite or simply through an email address. That way people are more likely to remember to attend and you will have some idea of how many to expect.

Local Government and the National Lottery provide small grants for this type of event but applying can be time consuming and needs to be done well in advance. See **www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/under10k** and your local government website which may also include a list of local charities offering support.

I. 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.