

HOW TO FIND AN ORGANIST: A CHECK LIST FOR CHURCHES AND SYNAGOGUES

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This article is written to provide some guidelines for securing the services of an organist and for ascertaining whether or not a candidate for the position has the appropriate skills. It is aimed specifically at music committee members with little or no formal education in music and for institutions of modest musical resources that cannot afford to hire a full-time musician.

Where can we find an organist?

1. If there is a chapter of the American Guild of Organists in or near your city, contact one of the officers. Quite often, the chapter will have a list of competent organists who are looking for a position.
2. Place an ad in the local paper. Be sure to specify how many services or rehearsals will be required, as well as a contact person's name, address and telephone number.
3. Music teachers in the local school system are often glad to supplement their income as organists.
4. If there is a college or university nearby, it might have instructors or students who are qualified. Call the music department and find out if there are any potential candidates.
5. Contact private music teachers in the community. They may have students who are qualified to handle the job.
6. Assess the talents in your own congregation. If a member shows a definite talent and is willing to consider learning to play the organ, offer to underwrite lessons as part of the salary.
7. Evaluate the desirability of the position you are offering. Sometimes all that is necessary to obtain an organist is to make your position more attractive.

Some things you might consider include:

1. Is the salary adequate and roughly equivalent to others in your area?
2. May the organist use the building for private lessons and practice?
3. Are there to be incentives for furthering one's musical education—workshops, seminars, etc.?

Let us assume that your initial efforts are successful and there are some applications for the position. How can you tell which one may be best suited for your particular situation? It is a good idea to plan an audition-interview for each person who applies. It is also wise to check with each candidate's previous employers prior to the interview.

Checking references and prior employment

Sample questions to ask might include any or all of the following:

1. Did this person fill the duties of organist competently?
2. How long did the person hold the position?
3. Why did the organist leave the job?
4. Would you recommend this person for a job as organist?

Audition

How can you tell if a person will make a good organist? Most organists have one or two pieces in their repertoire which might leave the committee in awe of their talent. Remember, however, that the most important function of the organist is to play the sung parts of the service and the hymns well. It does not do much good to have a beautiful prelude or postlude if the organist cannot lead the congregation in worship.

Suggest to the candidate that he or she prepare the following musical selections for the audition:

A prelude suitable for a communion or prayer service. Preference should be given to a prelude which is based on a hymn or chorale melody.

A postlude suitable for a festival occasion, such as Easter, Reformation, etc.

Choose several hymns of different types and moods. Ask the organist to play all the verses of these hymns. Suggested hymns might include:

Bethany (Nearer, my God, to Thee)
Nicaea (Holy, Holy, Holy)
Adestes fideles (O come, all ye faithful)
St. Columba (The King of love my shepherd is)
Adon Olam Yigdal

Any part of the service which requires organ accompaniment. This might be the Offertory, Gloria Patri or any part of the liturgy.

What to listen for during the audition

1. The prelude and postlude should give the committee an idea of the organist's ability to play literature written especially for the organ.
2. During the hymns, listen to the following:
 - a. Are the tempos suitable for the text? (For example, hymns which are contemplative or subjective in nature might be played slower than hymns of a festive or martial nature.)
 - b. Does the organist allow places for the congregation to breathe?
 - c. Can you tell when to come in after each verse is ended?
 - d. Are all the verses treated exactly the same way or are there changes in the volume or different accompaniments used?
 - e. Is the same tempo maintained through the hymn? (It should be!)
3. When the organist is playing parts of the service, be sensitive to the quality of leadership from the organist.

Interview

After the organist has played, the music committee should conduct an interview. Some concerns that might be included are:

Duties of the organist

1. How many services will the organist be required to play weekly? Is there a Sunday evening service?
2. Are there special services during Lent, Advent or the High Holy Days? Is there a week-long prayer mission?
3. Does the organist have the first prerogative to play for weddings or bar mitzvahs?
4. If there a suggested or stipulated fee the organist is to receive for extra services?
5. Is the organist expected to provide music for any other functions or organizations in addition to the services? (This might include women's/men's groups, Sunday School opening exercises, etc.)
6. Does the organist accompany the choir?
7. Who chooses the hymns or chants? How far in advance are they chosen?
8. Is the organist a member of the music and worship committee? How often does this committee meet?
9. When are funerals held? Is the organist expected to play for them? Is there a suggested or stipulated fee the organist is to receive?

Salary and benefits

1. What is the salary offered? Is the salary on a weekly basis or per-service basis?
2. Are there guidelines set for wedding and funeral fees? If so, who collects the fees?
3. Is the organist allowed to use the organ for practice? Is the organist allowed to use the building for teaching private lessons?
4. Are substitutes available for the organist in case of illness or emergency? Is the organist responsible for engaging a substitute or is the music committee?
5. Is the building cooled in summer and heated in winter? When is it locked?
6. Is there a provision in the budget to send the musician to workshops? Is time allowed off to attend seminars, continuing education events, etc.?

Hiring the organist

Congratulations! You have now hired a new organist. A final suggestion: it is a wise idea to give the new organist a written contract. This contract should include a job description, salary and benefits, vacation time allowance, and any other items mutually agreed upon. A sample contract may be obtained by writing to the American Guild of Organists, 815 Second Ave., Suite 318, New York, NY 10017.

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