

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

Music Notes ~ July 2024

Over the last two years we have been fortunate to have performed a number of Purcell's 'symphony anthems' at Evensong, thanks to extra support from the Hampstead Church Music Trust. We conclude this series with perhaps Purcell's most Italianate of anthems, *O sing unto the Lord*, on Sunday 7th July. It is a work of great musical contrasts, from the incisive, concerto-like opening, to the expressive harmonies that represent "the beauty of holiness". The textures include a lively quartet for upper voices and a dramatic bass solo, and the work ends with a typically tuneful Hallelujah section. For the Introit we will sing a chorale movement from one of J. S. Bach's church cantatas, BWV 107, also set for four-part strings and choir, and the final voluntary will be a string fantasia by Matthew Locke.

From time to time we sing Evensong based on plainchant, providing an opportunity to feel something of a connection with the services of Vespers and Compline that were combined in the 1549 Prayerbook to make the familiar Evensong format for the new Church of England. On Sunday 14th July, using music from the sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries by a variety of composers from the Low Countries, Spain, Germany and England, we hear music rooted in the ancient plainsong, with the two Canticles and Lord's Prayer sung in an alternating pattern of chant and polyphony. The multi-voice setting by Lassus of the great Marian antiphons of the church's year form one of the finest such collections, and my particular favourite, the *Salve Regina*, is the one that is appropriate for this time of year. The eight vocal parts are heard in many different combinations, but much is made of the alternation between upper and lower voices.

Throughout 2024 we are performing music by the great Anglo-Irish composer Charles Stanford to mark the 100th anniversary of his death, but our most significant contribution to the anniversary is on Sunday 21st, when the Introit, Canticles and Anthem are all by him. The epic anthem *For lo, I raise up* is a firm favourite of choirs with its peculiar text and dramatic style, but Stanford's compositional genius was aroused not by any attempt to please choral singers but by the tragedy of the onset of the First World War in 1914. He chose words from the prophet Habbakuk which dramatically juxtapose the horrors of conflict with the need for hope and trust in God. The work was not published in the composer's lifetime, but was eventually printed in 1939, when the words of the prophet were once again all too apposite.

Stanford's Anglo-Irish friend Charles Wood will have his own 100th anniversary in 2026, but as a foretaste of some of the delights we will explore in that year, on Sunday 14th we will perform movements from an unpublished Communion setting by him, probably not performed since his lifetime. Contrasting with the more familiar quasi-16th-century unaccompanied settings and his Latin Mass, this service is in the purely English style of the time, for four-part choir and organ.

At our final Evensong of the year on July 28th we begin with a loud and joyful Introit by Kenneth Leighton, *Let all the world in every corner sing*. Thereafter the music calms down somewhat, and the anthem is a peaceful setting of an *Old Irish Blessing* by Andrew Johnstone, one of the leading scholars of early English church music, based at Trinity College, Dublin. Ending on this Irish note, we all then get a chance to sing 'Danny Boy' in the form of the hymn 'O Christ the same' with a descant that rises to a top D flat, if the sopranos are feeling brave!

Geoffrey Webber