

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

Music Notes ~ November 2024

November is the month for Requiems, and this year the Come-and-Sing choice on Saturday 9th is Verdi's setting, which we will perform in a recent arrangement by Richard Blackford which expertly cuts down the full orchestral score to just 2 pianos, organ and percussion. On Sunday 10th the choir will sing Fauré's setting at the Remembrance Service in the morning (with larger forces than usual for a Sunday morning), and at 5 pm, when we hold the 'All Souls Memorial Service', we will sing most of the *Short Requiem* by Henry Walford Davies. This was composed in 1915 for the fallen during the First World War, and it seems that the texts chosen for it - different to the traditional liturgical ones - were assembled by his friend E. W. Hansell. The result is a sort of English Requiem, and the texts were used again by Herbert Howells in his *Requiem* that we sang last year at this same service. The music includes two superb psalm chants, and his version of Psalm 121, alternating solo and chorus, is often performed separately. Walford Davies was much involved in official musical matters during the war, organising concerts for the troops in France. In 1918 he was appointed director of music of the Royal Air Force, and he established the RAF School of Music. Since 1930 his *Solemn Melody* has been regularly performed at the Cenotaph, Whitehall, on Remembrance Sunday. Before and after the service we hear two organ pieces entitled 'Elegy', the first by Hubert Parry, another person much involved in the musical life of the nation during the First World War (though the work itself predates the war), and the second by the organist George Thalben-Ball, which dates from the Second World War. It originated in an improvisation which he played at the end of a live BBC daily service; so many listeners phoned the BBC to ask what the music was that he produced a written composition.

At Evensong on Sunday 3rd we sing an anthem by Robert Nathaniel Dett, a pioneering composer from the early 20th century, who became the first black composer to achieve several milestones in American music history. His family were descendents of enslaved people who had escaped captivity and settled near Niagara Falls. He spent most of his working life at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, and in 1926 became the first black director of music there. He wrote about his musical approach as follows: "We have this wonderful store of folk music—the melodies of an enslaved people ... But this store will be of no value unless we utilize it, unless we treat it in such manner that it can be presented in choral form, in lyric and operatic works, in concertos and suites and salon music—unless our musical architects take the rough timber of Negro themes and fashion from it music which will prove that we, too, have national feelings and characteristics, as have the European peoples whose forms we have zealously followed for so long." This approach was not without its critics who disapproved of his deliberate attempt to marry two very distinct musical traditions, but it provided a highly effective model that many others have since adopted in this and parallel circumstances.

Has anyone forgotten the Latin word for weeds? We hear it (*zizania*) in the delightful setting of the parable of the sower which we sing at Evensong on Sunday 17th, composed by the German who published music under the name Melchior Vulpius (the Germanic form was Fuchs). His principal appointment was as Cantor at Weimar in 1592, and his motet *Accedente servi* was published in 1602. Returning to more local fare, readers may recall the first performance of Hampstead Parochial School alumnus Toby Young's *Missa brevis*, commissioned with funds from the Church Music Trust, in May 2022. Whilst Dett's 'crossover' style coupled the Western classical tradition with Afro-American music, Toby's mix blends modern English choral music with idioms from contemporary popular music. The exuberant Gloria in particular will help us celebrate the Feast of Christ the King on Sunday 24th.

Geoffrey Webber