

## The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

### Music Notes ~ January 2025

During 2024 the principal composer's anniversary we marked in our regular liturgical music was that of Charles Stanford, who died in 1924. This year we celebrate another great figure from the Anglican tradition, Orlando Gibbons, who died in 1625 aged 41, a few days after having overseen the music for the funeral of James I. The quantity of his surviving church music is not large, but provides some of the most perfect examples of the anthem, service, hymn and voluntary traditions, many of which we will perform during the year. Several of his anthems survive in two formats, one with organ accompaniment and the other with a viol consort, and we begin our celebrations with his anthem *See, see the word is incarnate*, which we perform with viols on Sunday 26th January. This is a setting of a wonderful prose text by Godfrey Goodman, whose posts included being chaplain to Queen Anne, wife of James I, and court preacher. It tells the story of salvation from the incarnation to the last things, rather like the libretto of Handel's *Messiah* in miniature, and contains many memorable lines. In his day Gibbons was perhaps most famous as a keyboard player, his final post being as Organist at Westminster Abbey. A report of him playing at the Abbey noted that "the organ was touched by the best finger of that age, Mr Orlando Gibbons", and on his death he was hailed as "the best hand in England". If this suggests something of a showman, his surviving music paints a very different picture: it contains much carefully balanced harmony and rigorous counterpoint. His vocal writing may on paper look rather plain and unimaginative, but he had an unrivalled knack of fitting syllables to notes by capturing the rhythm and sense of the words with the simplest of musical means, rarely using melisma. In this way his music perhaps provides the most perfect solution to the strictures of the early Reformation when composers were instructed to use only one note for each syllable of the text. At Evensong on the 26th we will include mostly music by Gibbons across a range of liturgical genres, including two of his hymn tunes, a set of Preces (since unfortunately we have no surviving music by him for the Responses after the Creed), an organ voluntary and a setting of the evening canticles for full choir.

This month we add two 'new' settings of the Mass to our regular repertoire, one by the Roman composer Giovanni Felice Anerio, a *Missa brevis* from c.1600 that survives in manuscript in the Church of Santo Spirito in Sassia, close to the Vatican in Rome, and one by the Venetian composer Natale Monferrato, whose *Missa brevis* appeared in a collection of Masses and Magnificats published in Venice in 1681. Anerio was a chorister under Palestrina who helped maintain that composer's purity of style in his own compositions. Monferrato was a pupil of Rovetta and Cavalli, who composed both in the novel baroque idioms of his time and in the old Palestrina-inspired *stile antico* which we hear in his *Missa brevis*. Our Mass repertoire this month also includes a setting written specially for us at Hampstead by local composer Ben Ponniah, which was commissioned by the Church Music Trust and first performed here in September 2021.

For our Epiphany Evensong we sing three consecutive movements from Mendelssohn's unfinished oratorio on the life of Christ (possibly inspired by Handel's *Messiah*), a recitative sung by a narrator, a trio sung by the three wise men on their way to visit the baby Jesus, and a rousing chorus that features the Epiphany chorale *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* which we will hear twice in the service, since it also features in our introit, Worcester organist Ivor Atkins's English version of the Epiphany motet by Peter Cornelius published in 1870 as *Drei Könige wandern aus Morgenland*. Since Joshua will be on annual leave we welcome Richard Gowers once again to play the organ for us at this service, which will conclude with more Mendelssohn, the stirring opening movement of his *Sonata No. 4 in B-flat*. And just to show we won't forget Stanford in 2025, we also include in this service not only his evening canticles in B flat but also his morning canticle from the same set, the *Jubilate Deo*, since Psalm 100 happens to be the set psalm for the service.

Geoffrey Webber