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

**Music Notes ~ February 2025**

Much to my surprise, no-one has confronted me regarding my January notes to point out that whilst we do well to celebrate Orlando Gibbons (d. 1625) this year, we can scarcely avoid marking a major anniversary of perhaps the most celebrated composer of church music of them all, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, who was born half a millennium ago this year in 1525. Perhaps readers were at least partly assuaged by the appearance of his motet *Tribus miraculis* sung at Evensong for the Baptism of Christ. In February’s music list his name is sadly absent, but there will be plenty more of his music during the course of the year with a special attempt to mark the actual date in mid-December. Gibbons is back with another of his wonderful verse anthems, *If ye be risen again with Christ*, though this time we perform with organ accompaniment rather than viols.

This month we sing two Mass settings outside our regular fare, a *Mass in C* by Mozart and an unaccompanied setting which was once regularly sung here (the copies are old and much used!), by George Oldroyd (1886-1951), his *Missa Ave Jesu*. Nicknames have been adopted to distinguish between Mozart’s various Mass settings, and this month we perform K258, one of three settings in C he composed in late 1776. This one has been called the ‘Piccolomini’ Mass and the ‘Spaur’ Mass; the former presumably refers to the relative brevity of the setting despite its big orchestral scoring, and the latter relates to the Mass performed at the consecration of a bishop, Count Ignaz Joseph von Spaur, though it’s not certain if this was actually K258. George Oldroyd was a leading church musician and academic in his day, whose main posts were at the Anglo-Catholic church of St Michael’s in Croydon and King’s College London where he became Professor of Music. An expert on counterpoint, his own church music shows little of that technique, but inhabits an austere *a cappella* idiom that was deemed most suited to music performed in that tradition of the Church of England. A pamphlet written by Henry Walford Davies in 1913 sums up some aspects of this approach: “We need remoteness, aloofness, restraint…Church music should furnish an escape from all temporalities and personalities - including our own…Any excess is to be strictly shunned in that it will crowd out something; it is refreshing *wholeness* that is needed. Sensationalism and sensuousness are treachery in church. So is intellectuality, though it is not usually a very besetting sin.”

The Presentation chorale based on the Nunc dimittis, *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin*, appears three times on the 2nd of February, in the form of preludes by Bach and Buxtehude and also at the conclusion of the extended motet *Warum ist das Licht gegeben?* by Brahms sung at Evensong. The text of the motet is a typically challenging and intellectual compilation of Brahms, with passages from Job, Lamentation, the Epistle to James and the Nunc dimittis. The text begins “Why is light given to the weary, and life to those of a sad heart?" and Brahms emphasises the questioning mood with distinct settings of ‘Warum’. Whether his question is answered by the theology behind the subsequent texts is for each of us to consider.

Amongst other pieces being performed this month we have a sequence of movements from Haydn’s *Creation* (a general theme around this time of the liturgical calendar) in which Haydn unusually repeats and then extends his chorus ‘Achieved is the glorious work’, following a trio sung by archangels Gabriel (soprano), Uriel (Tenor) and Raphael (Bass). *Omnipotent Lord* by Charles Gounod was one of several works he composed for the choir of the newly-opened Royal Albert Hall in the 1870s, of which he was the chief conductor. And for further French music, don’t miss our Organ Scholar Louis performing two entertaining classics, the G major *Toccata* by Dubois and the *Sortie* in E flat by Lefébure-Wely.

Geoffrey Webber