

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

Music Notes ~ March 2025

The first Sunday in March this year is unusually not in Lent, so we begin the month with the same set of Preces & Responses at Evensong as February, matching the liturgical rather than monthly calendar. We also have much joyful music for this day, celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration, with the Junior Choir joining in much of Schubert's *Mass in G* at the All-Age Communion, and music on the theme of light at Evensong, including the popular *O nata lux de lumine* by Morten Lauridsen from 1997. The organ voluntary, *Deo gratias* by Rupert Jeffcoat of St Luke's Chelsea, was composed for a Bruckner anniversary concert in the Town Hall Birmingham last year. It combines themes from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, first performed in the Town Hall in 1846, with sketches by Bruckner.

Lent begins with our Ash Wednesday evening Holy Communion on the 5th March. In this 'Palestrina year' we sing his sonorous *Missa sine nomine a 6*, with two sopranos and two tenor parts, as well as the famous *Miserere* based on a chant by Gregorio Allegri, and later in the month we also include a specifically Lenten Mass by Palestrina, the *Missa Emendemus in melius*. Our final hymn will be sung to a tune I wrote when I was University Organist at Oxford, so music will be provided. Called 'Radcliffe Square', the harmony shifts between each phrase of the melody, as if one is perambulating the beautiful square.

The first Sunday Mass we sing in Lent is the *Missa speravimus* by Matthew Martin. The Gloria of this setting demands more than 4 singers, but since we are in Lent (no Gloria or Alleluias; 4 Collects at Evensong) we can readily sing the other movements which remain in four parts only. Matthew is Precentor at Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge, and composes much choral and organ music; this Mass is based on a short fragment of plainchant, and features a lively quasi-independent organ part.

There is plenty of 'diversity' on this month's list, both in terms of the composers themselves, and the ecclesiastical traditions from which they come. Perhaps the most striking example of the latter is the use of music from the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the form of my adaptations of unaccompanied chanting composed by Apostol Nikolaev-Strumski (1886-1971) who worked at two of the great cathedrals in Sofia, the Alexander Nevsky and St Nedelya. I came across his music when taking a choir on tour to Bulgaria in the early 1990s, and the large number of short, independent phrases in Strumski's chants proved relatively easy to adapt to our Preces & Responses; their minor tonality makes them best suited to the season of Lent. For a Lord's Prayer I turned to the Russian Orthodox tradition, using the simple setting by Rimski-Korsakov. Keeping with an Eastern European theme, we also sing this month the *Ave Maria* by Igor Stravinsky, and the setting of the story of *The Woman with the Alabaster Box* by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. Composed for a Swedish choir in 1997, the strands of the narrative are separated musically: upper voices take the lead, the disciples are represented by a male duet, and Jesus is sung by the lowest voices, before the full choir conveys Jesus's final pronouncement.

There is one unusual variation to our normal liturgical routine this month: at the final Evensong of the month we will sing the Magnificat as usual, to the 'Short Service' setting by Elizabethan composer Nicholas Stogers, but instead of the Nunc dimittis we will sing the BCP's alternative canticle for use at this point, the Deus misereatur, Psalm 67. Stogers unusually provided both the Nunc and Deus in his Short Service, and his Deus the earliest known complete setting of the psalm intended specifically for use in Evensong, probably composed around 1570. If want to find out more you might wish to skim-read "*David's Mystery and Mary's History*": *The Alternative Canticles at Evensong, (i) From the Reformation to the Interregnum* available under 'Lectures and Papers' at www.church-music.org.uk