

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

Music Notes ~ September 2025

We begin the new academic year without an Organist or Organ Scholar, but happily Joshua Ryan will still be playing the organ for many of our Evensong services for the time being (since his new church in Greenwich only holds this service once a month). Various visiting organists will cover other services as required, but for many morning services I will be at the organ, and the choir's repertoire will contain more unaccompanied music than usual. In September, we welcome in particular Martyn Noble who has just left the music staff at the Chapel Royal at St James's Palace to pursue more freelance work. Martyn also teaches at the Royal College of Music Junior Organ Department and at Highgate School, and has been helpful in identifying potential organ scholars for us in the past at Hampstead. Martyn will also be directing the choir when I am absent due a short concert tour on the last Sunday of the month.

Anyone with Oxford connections may well have heard about the recent controversy about the attempt by the Liberal Democrats to introduce a congestion charge. A leading Councillor in this proposal is another former musician of the Chapel Royal, Andrew Gant. I first knew Andrew when he was a Choral Scholar at St John's College, Cambridge, and his career since then has seen him busy as a choral director, composer and author, notably of a general history of English church music entitled *O sing unto the Lord*. Andrew has been active politically in both Cambridge and Oxford, and in the late sixteenth century both places also benefited from the musical and political activities of one man, William Gibbons. William was head of the town musicians, the waits, in both places, and served as a City Councillor during his time in Oxford. William's children included Orlando, one of the finest of English composers of church music who became Organist of Westminster Abbey in 1623, not long before his untimely death in 1625. Some of you may have heard the special edition of BBC Radio 4's Sunday Worship a few weeks ago in his memory (Gibbons died on 5th June), with the choir of The Queen's College, Oxford. The programme proudly claimed Oxford as his place of birth, with no mention of Cambridge. For centuries the birthplace of Orlando was declared to have been Cambridge, though the evidence has grown in recent years to show without doubt that it was in fact Oxford. William Gibbons served as a wait in Cambridge from 1567-1580 and then again from 1588 till his death in 1595. Although Orlando was born in 1583 during his father's time in Oxford, he became a chorister at King's College, Cambridge, in 1596, where his eldest brother, Edward, had become Master of the Choristers. Orlando thus grew up in the heart of the musical life of Cambridge, not Oxford. The Oxford choir sang beautifully in their tribute to Gibbons, and at least the Director of Music there, Professor Owen Rees, was educated at the University of...Cambridge.

This leads me to the chief musical event this month: the second of our two Evensongs this year with the accompaniment of viols, marking the 400th anniversary of the death of Orlando Gibbons. This time we sing two more verse anthems, *Lord, grant grace we humbly beseech thee*, and *Glorious and powerful God*, each with 5-part viol accompaniment. The first of these breaks into antiphonal writing in triple time for its central section devoted to the praise of the Trinity, the triple time echoing three persons in one, and the antiphonal nature reflecting the choirs of angels singing their praises. The second has a wonderful contemporary text that was picked up by both Charles Stanford and Charles Wood following the first published edition of the anthems of Gibbons by F. A. G. Ouseley in 1873. The text concerns the theme of the dedication of a temple, though we don't know for what particular occasion Gibbons composed it, calling for God to send down "full showers of mercy" and for us to praise God as the "founder and foundation of endless habitation." Ouseley hailed Gibbons as "the English Palestrina", a description that fits well at least in the sense that both composed a style that was extremely controlled and consistent in manner, achieving a kind of perfection within its genre. Ouseley's comment also resonates well today in 2025 as we celebrate the anniversaries of both Gibbons and Palestrina. More of Palestrina to come...

Geoffrey Webber