

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

Music Notes ~ November 2025

I'm delighted to report that Dr Eoghan Desmond, one of our choir basses, has recently composed a set of Preces & Responses, including the Lord's Prayer. The choir and I look forward to singing them at Evensong for three of the five Sundays in November. The final Sunday of the month is our Advent Carol Service, and the other Sunday has a very particular musical slant to it, as I've decided to make it our unofficial 'Palestrina Sunday', commemorating the Italian genius born half a millennium ago this year (as we approach his actual birthday of 17th December).

Having spent some 35 years of my life teaching 'the Palestrina style' to generations of Oxbridge students, I find myself knowing a great deal about perhaps a quarter of his overall vocal output, but rather less about the rest. This is because the style for which he was instantly and then continuously revered was in relation to a particular idiom he developed for some of his sacred works in which his control of musical dissonance in a contrapuntal texture was taken to an extreme. By learning various rules a student can thus in theory quickly learn to emulate the style. (Ripe for AI, a few extra new Palestrina masses and motets could surely be created without too much fuss.) Many students, alas, found the process very difficult, as the tasks we set them were a bit like solving a Sudoku puzzle, but the process was always worthwhile as they also learned a great deal about Renaissance music in general, its modal practice, voice ranges etc. Some students would turn up in triumph one week and point out to me a place in Palestrina's music where he apparently did what I told them they couldn't do. Always a pleasurable occasion, this meant the moment had been reached for us to talk about his music more widely, his legacy, and the merits of the task at hand. On our Palestrina Sunday, in the morning we will sing a splendid mass setting not often heard, the *Missa Dum esset summus pontifex*, a classic motet in his strictest style, *Ego sum panis vivus*, and in the evening we will explore some of his music that is less motivated by notions of strict counterpoint: two motets from his collection based on the Song of Songs, and settings of the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis for double choir which display his masterful handling of harmony.

For music at Communion this month we have a Spanish day for All Saints, a Portuguese day for Advent Sunday, and a jubilant mass setting for Christ the King by Michael Haydn, though the largest single item this month will of course be the Requiem on Remembrance Sunday, this year the plainsong-based setting by Maurice Duruflé. As organist for this we welcome John Keys, who has recently retired from being Director of Music at St Mary's, Nottingham. Also playing for us this month (for the evening services on 2nd and 30th November) is Francesca Massey, formerly of Durham and Rochester Cathedrals, now working freelance in the London area.

You may notice a rather curious juxtaposition of canticles at Evensong on the Feast of Christ the King. It's not really an attempt to perform Matins and Evensong at the same time, but just that the texts of two of the morning canticles are particularly suitable for the theme of the day, and we too rarely have the opportunity in any case to sing some of the marvelous Anglican repertoire for Matins. Most musical settings of the Te Deum make much of the line 'Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ', and the Jubilate comes at the end of a series known as the 'royal' psalms. S. S. Wesley's Te Deum in E is suitably grand and imposing, with some bold contrasts of tonality in the latter stages before its triumphant return to E major.

Finally, along with familiar favourites the Advent Carol service will contain 'Telling', a 2021 work by one of the country's leading composers, Helen Grime MBE.

Geoffrey Webber