

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead Music Notes ~ February 2026

This month we mark a significant anniversary in the musical life of the church with a concert remembering former Organist and Director of Music Martindale Sidwell. In addition to the concert on Saturday 21st, there is one further musical connection to Sidwell that may not be obvious from the Music List – the introit *I will love thee, O Lord my strength* by Peter Gritton to be sung at Evensong on Sunday 8th. Peter is a former choir member whose varied work is noted on his website as follows: ‘Peter Gritton is a composer, performer and educator. He writes music to private and public commission, as well as for an array of internationally known publishers. He sings professionally as a countertenor, most recently with Tenebrae and I Fagiolini and directs Celestia Music in the provision of music for weddings, funerals and thanksgivings. After leading the music departments of St Paul’s School and James Allen’s Girls’ School (JAGS), he is now in demand as an adjudicator and workshop leader, supporting music at grass-root level in schools.’ The introit remains published but survives in our library, and is headed ‘for Martindale Sidwell’, so this seemed a good time to resurrect it. Like me, Peter started his musical career as a chorister at Salisbury Cathedral, and when I asked him about the piece he said that he had been asked specifically to compose “an impactful introit”, but I don’t wish to spoil the unusual effect he demands by warning you in advance! Peter is away conducting on the 21st so sadly cannot attend the concert, but is delighted that we are performing his piece this month.

At the time of writing it is not clear yet how many former musicians will be returning for the celebratory concert on the 21st, but the event has sparked much interest. The committee of the Friends of the Music has put much effort into planning the occasion, and I am pleased to note that former Organist and Director of Music Lee Ward should be amongst the returning group, which will include former organists as well as singers, and I hope to share some of the conducting of the concert with one or two others. The programme, with its mix of baroque splendour and favourite church anthems, is highly unusual, but designed to reflect both Martin and his wife Barbara, a renowned pianist and harpsichordist.

Picking out one relatively unfamiliar composer this month from the music list, I’d like to mention Johannes Eccard (1553-1611). To many a cathedral chorister he’s a one-hit wonder, known for his anthem *When to the temple Mary went* which has been a staple anthem for the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (also known as the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or Candlemas) since the end of the 19th century. The prolific translator of musical works into English Rev. John Troutbeck, whose credits include the first full English version of Bach’s Christmas Oratorio, spent the later part of his life as Canon Precentor of Westminster Abbey. The particular stimulus for Troutbeck’s interest in Eccard’s music is unknown, but his English version of Eccard’s German motet was first published in the Bach Choir Magazine in 1877, and later by Novello. Eccard’s original was published in a now lost collection entitled *Preussischer Fest-Lieder* (Prussian feast-songs), put together by his pupil Johannes Stobaeus in the 1640s. The collection contains strophic settings of poems by contemporary poets celebrating the major feasts of the church’s year. Fortunately the collection was copied out and thus preserved in Berlin by the mid-19th-century German scholar Gustav Teschner. The author of the original text ‘Maria das Jungfräulein’ was Peter von Hagen, who like Eccard and Stobaeus worked in the former East Prussian city of Königsberg. This was a major intellectual and cultural centre before 1939, but now having been completely destroyed, the city is the Russian naval port of Kaliningrad, sandwiched awkwardly between Poland and Lithuania. The religion of Königsberg under Prussian domination was Calvinist, so the musical life of the churches was rather limited, but it did give rise to these delightful songs. The top voice has much melodic charm, and Eccard happily leavens the homophonic lump with modest bursts of independent part-writing within the six-part texture.

Geoffrey Webber