

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

Music Notes ~ March 2026

This year, instead of singing one of the Passions of J. S. Bach in place of Evensong on Passion Sunday, we perform *The Passion of Our Lord according to St Mark* by Charles Wood, as part of our celebrations marking the centenary of Wood's death in 1926. Wood composed the work at the request of the Dean of King's College, Cambridge, Dr Eric Milner-White, who famously introduced the service of Nine Lessons and Carols to King's College (the basis of which had been established at Truro Cathedral in 1880 by Bishop Benson). Whilst recovering from appendicitis in a Cambridge Nursing Home, Milner-White wrote a detailed letter to Wood in 1920 outlining what he had in mind, including the following:

We wanted badly this year during Holy Week to do some Passion Music at King's. Mann [Organist Arthur Mann] and I went through everything that exists...and could find nothing. The Bach Passions are too vast...the Cantatas also unsuitable, not in length but in words and idea. So the College asked me to invent a Passion Cantata or a Passion Chorale. Also, it is about time that the bigger parish churches superseded Stainer's Crucifixion – or at least had an alternative.

He then described several ideas for the libretto and suggested that the two of them should meet to discuss the matter more fully, ending “But I do feel in this matter, I speak for a tremendous and growing need of the Church”. By August the work was complete, and it's clear that Wood had some important suggestions to make about the nature of the interpolated elements, as they both sought to find something more English, or indeed more universal, than the Lutheran chorales used by Bach. The work is book-ended by the great plainsong hymn *Pange lingua*, ‘Sing my tongue the glorious battle’, and Wood uses English metrical psalm-tunes including one of the finest by Thomas Tallis. The chorus occasionally takes over some of the narration, and after the death of Jesus the Confession is said by all, and Milner-White gives instructions for the appropriate kneeling and standing, and other details.

Also on the subject of Passions, this year we will complete a cycle of Passion settings by Orlando di Lasso, having sung those for St Mark and St Luke over the last two years following the liturgy as set for Palm Sunday, with St Matthew coming up this year. As with the other two, we will hear most of the text chanted in English, but the choral sections (representing the crowd) will be sung in Latin. However, I have intervened a little more than usual as some of the sections require more than our usual four voices in the choir, so I have adapted these to fit our singing team. (We will sing the most famous Renaissance setting of them all, by Victoria, as usual during the service of the liturgy on Good Friday.)

A notable rarity this month is a ‘Penitential’ setting of the Evensong Preces & Responses by Sir Robert Prescott Stewart, recently edited by David O'Shea from sources in Dublin. Stewart was a leading figure in Irish music during much of the 19th century: his posts included being Organist at both St Patrick's and Christ Church Cathedrals, and Professor of piano, organ, harmony and counterpoint at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. A letter written by Stewart mentions his Preces & Responses as follows: “Our Dean has just found...the set of Penitential Responses written by me for the obsequies of Arthur, Duke of Wellington, in 1852... We have sung them at Christ Church all this Lent, and everyone (even D., who likes and praises nothing) likes them! They differ from all other responses, in being either jubilant or sad, according to the character of the suffrages.” Also notable is the Minister's part which contains composed lines rather than the usual chant formulas.

Geoffrey Webber

CHOIR NEWS

I am pleased to announce that a replacement has now been found for our 'Evensong' soprano, Rebecca Hardwick, who left us last summer: Olivia Hugh-Jones. No stranger to singing with us in recent months, including on Christmas Day, she will join us as a regular singer this month. A biographical note will be added to the Music section of the website soon.

Geoffrey Webber