

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

Music Notes ~ May 2026

The organ music that surrounds our services week by week is often chosen to fit either a liturgical or purely musical theme, and May's selection of music has many examples of this. On the morning of Sunday 3rd we hear hymn preludes by the great Anglo-Irish friends and contemporaries Stanford and Wood, alongside choral music by both composers. In the evening, when we happily celebrate two diamond weddings (as written about in last month's magazine), the final voluntary will be Widor's famous *Toccata* that became particularly popular for weddings following the royal marriages of Princess Margaret (1960), the Duke of Kent (1961) and Princess Alexandra of Kent (1963), and was played at both weddings being remembered (1966). During the periods of Ascension and Pentecost we will enjoy the organ music of Olivier Messiaen composed for this feast, together with settings of Whitsun chorales by J. S. Bach, and plainsong melodies by Peter Philips, the English Roman Catholic organist who worked in the Spanish Netherlands in the early 17th century. And on Trinity Sunday we hear two movements of a monumental cycle of verses on the plainsong *O lux beata Trinitas* by Lutheran organist Mattias Weckmann, a contemporary and friend of Heinrich Schütz who worked in Dresden and Hamburg.

Last year we sang the earliest known setting of the evening canticles by a woman composer, that by Lucy Moseley of Exeter, composed in 1812. There are still not a large number of such settings in circulation (a splendid one by Ruth Gipps from 1959 is too difficult for us to take on under normal circumstances), though the number is now increasing of course. Those of you who attended the Martindale Sidwell anniversary concert in February may recall that we sang Sidwell's *Festal Jubilate* in an edition by former Hampstead chorister, the composer Sebastian Forbes. One pleasing aspect of this was that the conductor Lee Ward (see Desert Island Discs on Saturday 16th) invited Sebastian's daughter Joanna Forbes L'Estrange to sing the brief soprano solo. Joanna herself is a noted composer of church music, and at Evensong on the 10th May we will sing her *King's College Service*, composed not for the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, but the college's more informal mixed choir, King's Voices, which sings Evensong on Monday evenings.

On the morning of Sunday 10th May, the music and hymns will have a strong Rogationtide flavour, preceding the Hampstead Heath Rogation Sunday Pilgrimage 2026 (British Pilgrimage Trust) being organised by Rupert Sheldrake and Guy Hayward. The adjacent Evensongs for Ascensiontide and Pentecost contain two notably contrasted selections of music. For Ascension we sing a mostly plainsong-based service in Latin, including a notably elaborate setting of the Magnificat, sung *in alternatim* with polyphony and chant by Victoria, a set of Preces by Lassus adapted to BCP texts, and a splendidly joyful motet by Peter Philips (as mentioned above). For Pentecost we return to more traditional Anglican fare, with two grand works from 1892 and 1914, respectively Basil Harwood's sonorous *Magnificat and Nunc dimittis in A flat* and Elgar's rousing Psalm setting *Give unto the Lord*, composed for the annual Festival of the Sons of the Clergy in St Paul's Cathedral.

As we continue our celebration this year of the church music of Charles Wood (d. 1926), on Trinity Sunday, 31st May, we perform his *Magnificat and Nunc dimittis in G* composed in 1915. Set for double choir, the work naturally invites comparison with his more well-known double-choir setting in F for King's College, Cambridge, also composed in 1915. The F major setting is with organ, and the G major setting without, and the latter opens in a fairly unassuming manner for the full chorus singing together as SATB, with verses alternative between Decani and Cantoris. However, at 'For he that is mighty' the music becomes properly composed for double choir, and Wood employs many of the same musical devices as in the F major setting, such as bringing the end of the doxology to a dramatic halt before the final triumphant cadence.

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