

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

Music Notes ~ June 2026

At Evensong on the first Sunday in June the choir will sing one of J. S. Bach's celebrated motets, *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf* (BWV 226): 'The Spirit comes to help our weakness'. It is highly demanding on the singers' abilities, being set for double choir, so that each of our 8 singers will deliver an independent and taxing vocal line, with any 'inspiration' coming from above being doubtless gratefully received. The piece is often performed around the season of Pentecost, not just because of the opening text (derived from Romans 8), but also because the work concludes with the final verse of the famous Pentecost chorale *Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott*. Bach composed the work, partly re-working material from previous compositions, not in fact for liturgical use at Pentecost, but for the funeral in 1729 of his widely respected colleague Johann Ernesti, the Headmaster of the school at the *Thomaskirche* in Leipzig where they both lived and worked. Ernesti also served as a professor of poetry at the university (which meant that the funeral was held at the University church, the *Pauluskirche*). Quite how well the two close colleagues got on with each other is hard to gauge, since Ernesti is known to have overruled some of Bach's working practices with the boys. But Bach produced a fine piece of music, and the work was performed with strings doubling Choir I and wind instruments doubling Choir 2, and with organ and string continuo. The main reason why Bach called this work 'Motetta' is that although instruments participate, they do not have independent parts – they simply double the vocal lines, so the music is exclusively bound to the text (motetus), rather than based on the concept of voices and instruments working together (concertus). Bach's use of instruments followed the custom of the day where support was provided for most vocal performances, one advantage of which was that the music can still work if, say, illness strikes down a singer. TFL strikes and health permitting, we will hope to perform the work with 8 singers alone.

Judith Weir composed two pieces for choir and organ in 1994 on the occasion of Aberdeen University's 500th anniversary. One of these sets George Herbert's poem 'Love Bade Me Welcome', and in 1997 she re-arranged the work for unaccompanied voices for a choir from Orkney to perform at Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, Norway, during the city's millenium celebrations. Its simple lines mainly heard in the upper voices, and lush harmonies furnished by the lower voices, brilliantly complement the poetry. We perform the work as the Introit at Evensong on the 14th.

For the All-Age Communion this month, on the 21st, the combined junior and senior choirs will perform the *Johannesburg Service* by organist/composer John Bertalot, who died in February this year. His grandfather was an Italian coal merchant who moved to Wales, but John grew up in Kent and Sussex and attended the Royal College of Music, and then both Oxford and Cambridge universities. He spent much of his career at Blackburn Cathedral but he also worked in Princeton, USA, for 15 years before retiring back to Lancashire. He was much in demand as choral director and general choral animateur, including working for the Royal School of Church Music in South Africa, and it was his extended visits to that country that brought about his Communion Service on South African melodies.

There is plenty of interesting organ music to be heard this month, played by our continuing stream of visiting organists, this month comprising Francesca Massey, Joshua Ryan, Tamas Slater and Martyn Noble. Composers include Elizabeth Stirling (1819-1895), the organist of St Andrew Undershaft in the City of London, whose Oxford degree composition was passed in 1853 (under her initials only), but then rescinded when it became apparent the composer was a woman, Ascanio Mayone (1565-1627) who worked in Naples (and we welcome a current Neapolitan organist to give our July recital), and the Czech organist Johann Wanhal (1739-1813) whose work was much admired by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, all of whom feature in the morning service on Sunday 28th (if we conveniently conflate the Haydn brothers...)

Geoffrey Webber