

The Parish Church of St John-at-Hampstead

Music Notes ~ September 2026

This month we welcome not one but two new altos to our professional choir. At Sunday morning services our new regular alto will be Lucy Gibbs. She has sung with us on a few occasions in the past, but having been based abroad over the last year or so, she is now back in the UK, and is currently a '2026 Rising Star of Voice' at the Edinburgh International Festival. At Sunday evening services our new regular alto alongside Jess will be Eleriin Müüripeal. Eleriin is Estonian, and a graduate of the Sibelius Academy in Finland, recently moved to London. At the organ this month we will have two visiting organists: Francesca Massey returns, and we welcome Joshua Simões, a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music who has recently won the 2026 Musicians' Company Award for Organists. (Our Organ Recital Series is currently suspended until we appoint a new Organist.)

Our sermon series this year has the general theme 'lessons from history', and our anthems will pick up on aspects of this, mainly through texts from the Book of Psalms. The anthem *O how amiable are thy dwellings* by Ralph Vaughan Williams (Sunday 6th) ends with the first verse of the hymn 'O God our help in ages past', whilst the setting of verses from Psalms 78 and 103 by Heinrich Schütz (Sunday 13th) involve a similar theme. In Edward Bairstow's magnificent anthem *Lord thou hast been our refuge* (Sunday 20th) with words from Psalms 90, 103 and 144, the memorable opening text is given special emphasis through repetition.

Our year-long exploration of the music of Charles Wood (d. 1926) continues with another of his Communion Services, that in C minor, composed in his *stile antico* idiom with no independent organ part. This month we sing two contrasted settings of the evening canticles by former Chichester Cathedral organist Thomas Weelkes (d. 1623). His 'Short Service' is indeed short (we are singing a longer anthem) but full of character, alternating between the two sides of the choir as was typical in this idiom. His 'Service for Trebles' is a more extended setting with an independent organ part, and the title refers not so much to the matter of who was to sing the top line, but to its unusually high tessitura, recalling the pre-Reformation style of choral writing in which the boys routinely sang the top two lines of the standard 5-voiced texture, the lower part called in Latin *Medius* (in English Mean) and the top part *Triplex* (Treble), the latter famously described retrospectively in 1636 as a 'high, clear voice'.

Hugh Blair was Organist of Worcester Cathedral at the end of the nineteenth century. He struggled with the authorities during his time there and appears to have left prematurely when the (unknown) last straw occurred on return from his honeymoon. He then became organist at a fashionable London church - not Hampstead, but Holy Trinity Marylebone, the now redundant church very similar in style to nearby Marylebone Parish Church. His most famous church composition is his setting of the evening canticles - Blair in B Minor (partly re-written by his Worcester successor Atkins) - but he published many other fine service settings including the Communion Service in G which we perform on Sunday 27th. Concerning 'Miss E. J. Hirst' we know almost nothing (Introit, 20th), not even her Christian name; this short anthem is found in manuscripts at Canterbury Cathedral dating from the mid-19th century.

Finally, the main music chosen for the service at which we remember former vicar Revd Stephen Tucker (27th September) was requested by him: Howells & Ireland.

Geoffrey Webber