

The Cherwell Singers

present

The Wings of Faith

*Hymn-anthems from the Nonconformist tradition,
to texts by Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley*

Dónal McCann

organ

James Brown

conductor

Sunday, 16th March, 2025

Chapel of Mansfield College, Oxford

Programme

ISAAC WATTS

Give us the wings of faith Ernest Bullock
When I survey the wondrous cross Gilbert Martin
How beauteous are their feet C. V. Stanford

‘A Cradle Hymn’ (Hush, my dear) Ashley Grote

(Organ solo)

Chorale Fantasia on ‘St Anne’ C. H. H. Parry

O how amiable are thy dwellings R. Vaughan Williams
Give us the wings of faith James Whitbourn

Interval

CHARLES WESLEY

Jesu, lover of my soul Jeffry Howard
Rejoice the Lord is King Grayston Ives
Christ, whose glory fills the skies Gerald H. Knight
Author of life divine Richard Shephard

(Organ Solo)

Prelude on ‘Rhosymedre’ R. Vaughan Williams

Love divine, all loves excelling Herbert Howells
Love’s redeeming work is done Bryan Kelly

The audience is asked not to applaud within the groups of pieces

Dónal McCann organ
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The Wings of Faith

*Hymn-anthems from the Nonconformist tradition,
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Between them, the two towering figures of English hymnody, Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, produced some of the most famous and memorable hymn texts in the English language.

Although Wesley remained an Anglican cleric, he is most closely associated nowadays with the birth of the Methodist church, while Watts was a Congregationalist minister and theologian.

Mansfield College is a Nonconformist foundation – the first in Oxford. So the chapel (1889) is unconsecrated, and its statues and windows depict leading Nonconformists such as Cromwell, William Penn, and Sir Henry Vane as well as Isaac Watts and John Wesley, brother of Charles.

It seems fitting therefore to sing the words of these two men here; and not just as hymns, but instead elevated as anthems, in richer and more colourful textures, by English-speaking composers of later times.

We do hope you enjoy hearing these great words matched to some familiar, and not so familiar, musical settings.

James Brown

Notes

The Origins of Hymnody

In the early church, following on from Jewish practice, the psalms were sung, with the addition of a handful of canticles and other biblical texts, and texts written as parts of the liturgy, fixed, but varied according to the season.

In the Roman Catholic church, this singing was continued, with little change. The texts were always in Latin, and congregational participation was rare. New texts were uncommon, as the authorities were afraid that they might mistakenly, or even deliberately, introduce heretic thoughts; but musical elaboration using established texts was encouraged, leading to the great anthems of the Renaissance, sung by dedicated choirs on behalf of the worshippers.

But hymns as we now understand them – new texts, in the vernacular, sung by all – were one of the products of the Reformation instigated primarily by Martin Luther in 1517.

Not all reformers were in favour – Calvin insisted that only biblical texts, i.e. psalms and canticles, should be sung, and that in a plain manner; and Zwingli, though a musician himself, destroyed church organs and greatly limited singing. In England, the Puritans took this to the extreme of a complete ban on music.

Hymns in the English Churches

When Henry VIII split the Church of England from Rome, Archbishop Cranmer took the opportunity to reform it, introducing vernacular liturgies. There was a tendency towards Calvinism, which meant singing the psalms, but it became normal to sing these in versions which had been translated into verse which could be sung strophically to simple tunes by everyone.

During the period up to the Commonwealth and the Restoration, a number of non-biblical hymn collections were published, but most churches viewed them with suspicion. Dissatisfaction with the poetry of the early metrical psalms by Sternhold and Hopkins (1562) led to new versions, most notably by Tate and Brady (1696) – who also included some new hymns.

Isaac Watts

But this was all to change at the hand of **Isaac Watts** (1674-1748). Watts was the son of a Nonconformist minister, and himself was later a minister in what became the Congregational church. As a child he had a propensity to rhyme, and once responded to some chastisement with a rhyming couplet. When punished in turn for this, he responded: “O father, father, pity take / and I will no more verses make”. In his late teens, after he complained about the hymns in his father’s services, he was challenged to do better, and went ahead and wrote his first hymn.

Watts promoted the use of hymns in worship, and provided for this not only with further improved metrical psalm paraphrases, but also with hymns based on biblical teaching and especially the Christian experience. He was a strong advocate of the idea that psalm paraphrases could be adapted to a Christian viewpoint; or as he wrote in his metrical psalter: “imitated in the language of the New Testament.” He also gave a fuller explanation:

Where the Psalmist describes religion by the fear of God, I have often joined faith and love to it. Where he speaks of pardon of sin through the mercies of God, I have added the merits of a Saviour. Where he talks of sacrificing goats and bullocks, I rather mention the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God. When he attends the ark with shouting into Zion, I sing of the ascension of my Saviour into heaven, or His presence in His church on earth. Where he promises abundance of wealth, honour, and long life, I have changed some

of these typical blessings for grace, glory, and life eternal, which are brought to light in the Gospel, and promised in the New Testament.

In all Watts wrote some 750 hymns, the most important collection of which was his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* of 1707. Not for nothing has he been called “the father of hymnody”!

Aside from his hymns Watts was also a philosopher, and in 1724 he wrote a textbook of logic which was still in use at Oxford University over a century later, and which was also used at Cambridge, Harvard and Yale.

Although Watts was a Dissenter, he has a memorial in Westminster Abbey.

Charles Wesley

John Wesley (1703-1791) and **Charles Wesley** (1707-1788) were the fifteenth and eighteenth children of an Anglican country Rector. While a student at Oxford Charles formed a reading group, whose members were all religious. The group was mocked as the “Holy Club”, and because of their methodical approach to serving God at all times, they came to be called “Methodists”. Both brothers were ordained as priests after their university studies.

After university, Charles went with his brother to Georgia in America, where they came into contact with Moravian Pietists who greatly influenced them, leading to their “Evangelical Conversion” back in England a few years after.

While in Georgia, John published his first (of 64) collection of hymns – it contained 35 hymns by Watts, 11 by his father Samuel and elder brother Samuel, but none by Charles. In contrast, *Hymns for the People called Methodists* (1780) contained over 500 hymns (later editions reached 1,000), the large majority of which were by Charles. In all Charles published over 2,000 hymns, and around 4,500 more exist in manuscript.

Compared with Isaac Watts’s generally straightforward, objective texts, Charles Wesley tended to employ more complex, intricate poetic devices and metres. In contrast to Watts’s more Calvinistic theology, Wesley’s hymns reflect the brothers’ Arminianism, and are always infused with the deep piety that lay at the core of their theology.

Charles and his brother had many disagreements, but this never damaged their friendship; and even when Charles died leaving a request to be buried at his parish church rather than at the nearby independent chapel where John had prepared a space, this request was honoured.

Charles Wesley’s son Samuel and his grandson Samuel Sebastian were both important composers and performers.

The Anthems

Hymns are by their nature intended for congregational singing, though both Watts, and to a much greater extent Wesley, wrote hymns using the personal “I” rather than the communal “we”. But it is natural to want to offer sometimes a more elaborate and practiced rendering of some hymns, using the musical resources of a choir and organ – hence the anthems we are singing for you tonight. We have grouped the settings using the words of each writer together as the two halves of the concert.

We start with a group of settings of words by Isaac Watts. **Ernest Bullock** (1890-1979) was born in Wigan, and was in turn organist of Exeter Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. He composed about 20 anthems and other service music. ***Give us the wings of faith to rise*** is a simple but effective piece whose music faithfully reflects the words, illustrating the “joys” and “glories” at the start, the sense of “conquest” or “triumph” in the middle, and finally the “promised rest” at the end.

Give us the wings of faith to rise within the veil, and see
the saints above, how great their joys, how bright their glories be.

We ask them whence their victory came: they, with one united breath,
ascribe the conquest to the Lamb, their triumph to his death.

They marked the footsteps that he trod, his zeal inspired their breast,
and, following their incarnate God, they reached the promised rest.

When I survey the wondrous cross. Note the use of first-person singular, making this hymn a personal devotion – something Watts started, but Wesley did even more. The musical setting by **Gilbert M Martin** (1941-), a noted American composer for voices and organ, is based on a hymn tune written by **Lowell Mason** (1792-1872). Mason aimed to provide tunes based on classical composers rather than existing American traditions.

When I survey the wond'rous Cross
On which the Prince of Glory dy'd,
My richest Gain I count but Loss,
And pour Contempt on all my Pride.
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the Death of Christ my God:
All the vain Things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his Blood.

See from his Head, his Hands, his Feet,
Sorrow and Love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such Love and Sorrow meet,
Or Thorns compose so rich a Crown?
Were the whole Realm of Nature mine,
That were a Present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my Soul, my Life, my All.

C V Stanford (1852-1924) wrote a number of anthems shortly before his death, of which *How beauteous are their feet* is the best known. It is in variation form, with the same theme starting each verse but being given different treatments thereafter.

How beauteous are their feet, who stand on Sion's hill,
who bring salvation on their tongues and words of peace reveal!
How happy are our ears that hear this happy sound,
which kings and prophets waited for, and sought, but never found!
How blessed are our eyes that see this heavenly light,
prophets and kings desired it long, but died without the sight!
The Lord makes bare his arm through all the earth abroad:
Let every nation now behold their Saviour and their God!

Hush, my dear, lie still and slumber was published in the Eighth Edition of Watts's *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1727), with the title "A Cradle Hymn". **Ashley Grote** (1982-) was the first organist to reach the keyboard final of the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition, in 2000; he has also competed in Masterchef. He is currently Master of Music at Norwich Cathedral. His simple setting of this hymn employs some piquant harmonies.

Hush! My dear, lie still and slumber, Holy angels guard thy bed! Heavenly blessings without number Gently falling on thy head.	How much better thou art attended Than the Son of God could be, When from heaven He descended And became a child like thee!
May'st thou live to know and fear Him, Trust and love Him all thy days; Then go dwell for ever near Him, See His face, and sing His praise!	

C H H Parry (1848-1918) was a contemporary of Stanford, and like him was an important educator. This *Chorale Fantasia on St Anne* is based on the tune *St Anne* by **William Croft** (1678-1727) which is now universally used for the hymn *O God, our Help in Ages Past* by Isaac Watts.

A student of Parry, the importance of **R Vaughan Williams** (1872-1958) in both secular and sacred music in Great Britain cannot be overstated. *O how amiable* is a setting of parts of psalms 84 and 90 ending with a verse from Isaac Watts, using **William Croft**'s tune. The musical style evolves with the text; for instance, stately at the words, "The glorious majesty," then swelling to the climactic point on the words, "And our eternal home."

O how amiable are thy dwellings: thou Lord of hosts!
 My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the Lord:
 My heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.
 Yea, the sparrow hath found her a house,
 And the swallow a nest where she may lay her young:
 Even the altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.
 Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: They will be always praising thee.
 The glorious majesty of the Lord our God be upon us:
 Prosper thou the work of our hands upon us, O prosper thou our handiwork.
from Psalms 84, 90, tr. Myles Coverdale (1488-1569)
 O God, our help in ages past,
 Our hope for years to come,
 Our shelter from the stormy blast,
 And our eternal home.

We end our group of anthems based on hymns by Isaac Watts with a second setting of *Give us the wings of faith* (words above). **James Whitbourn** (1963-2024) started his career at the BBC, becoming associated with the BBC Philharmonic, and ended it with a number of appointments in Oxford University. He composed mainly for voices with various instruments.

Surveys have found that Charles Wesley's hymn *Jesu, Lover of my Soul* is one of the best-loved hymns of the English people. He wrote this hymn, so realistic and descriptive of the fear and intense longing of the anxious soul to find safety and rest, in the middle of a storm. **Jeffry Howard** (1968-) was born in Cardiff, where he is based as a concert organist, accompanist, and arranger. The anthem is based on the tune *Aberystwyth* written for these words by the Welsh composer **Joseph Parry** (1841-1903).

Jesus, Lover of my soul, Let me to Thy bosom fly; While the nearer waters roll, While the tempest still is high! Hide me, O my Saviour, hide, Till the storm of life is past, Safe into the haven guide; O receive my soul at last!	Other refuge have I none; Hangs my helpless soul on Thee; Leave, ah! leave me not alone, Still support and comfort me! All my trust on Thee is stayed, All my help from Thee I bring: Cover my defenseless head With the shadow of Thy wing.
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Plenteous grace with Thee is found,
 Grace to cover all my sin;
 Let the healing streams abound;
 Make and keep me pure within;
 Thou of life the Fountain art,
 Freely let me take of Thee:
 Spring Thou up within my heart!
 Rise to all eternity!

Grayston Ives (1948-) was organist of Magdalen College for many years. He wrote this exuberant setting of *Rejoice the Lord is King* on the occasion of the retirement of Edward Higginbottom as organist of New College.

Rejoice, the Lord is King! your Lord and King adore;
mortals give thanks and sing, and triumph evermore;

Lift up your heart, lift up your voice;

rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Jesus, the saviour, reigns, the God of truth and love;
when he had purged our stains he took his seat above;

Lift up your heart, ...

His kingdom cannot fail, he rules both earth and heaven,
the keys of death and hell are to our Jesus given;

Lift up your heart,

He sits at God's right hand till all his foes submit,
and bow to his command, and fall beneath his feet:

Lift up your heart,

Gerald H Knight (1908-1979) was organist of Canterbury Cathedral, and co-editor of the 1950 edition of Hymns Ancient and Modern. Subsequently he was Director of the Royal School of Church Music, where he published books of music for services. The anthem *Christ whose glory fills the skies* was written for one of these books.

Christ, whose glory fills the skies
Christ, the true, the only Light,
Sun of Righteousness, arise,
Triumph o'er the shades of night;
Dayspring from on high, be near,
Daystar, in my heart appear.

Dark and cheerless is the morn
Unaccompanied by Thee;
Joyless is the day's return,
Till Thy mercy's beams I see,
Till Thou inward light impart,
Glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

Visit then this soul of mine,
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, Radiancy divine,
Scatter all my unbelief;
More and more Thyself display,
Shining to the perfect day.

Richard Shephard (1949-2021) was a prolific composer in many genres, best known for his choral music. He combined this with a career as headmaster or assistant head at several independent schools. There is a grotesque in his likeness on York Minster, where he also worked. His setting of *Author of life divine* is for three voices, being part of a collection for choirs short of men's voices.

Author of life divine,
who hast a table spread,
furnished with mystic wine
and everlasting bread,
preserve the life Thyself hast given,
and feed and train us up for heav'n.

Our needy souls sustain
with fresh supplies of love,
till all Thy life we gain
and all Thy fullness prove,
and strengthened by Thy perfect grace,
behold without a veil Thy face.

Vaughan Williams's setting of *Rhosymedre* is commonly performed alone as a hymn-tune prelude, but it is actually the second of a set of three *Preludes on Welsh Hymn Tunes* designed also to be performed together. The tune *Rhosymedre* was written by **J D Edwards** (1805-1885) and is often used for Wesley's hymn *Author of life divine*.

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling reflects the Wesley brothers' teachings on Christian perfection, expressing a longing for God's transforming and sanctifying grace. It has been set to various tunes, but was apparently intended as a Christianization of the song *Fairest Isle* from Purcell's music for *King Arthur*, whose tune it is sometimes sung to. **Herbert Howells's** (1892-1983) "extended hymn tune" setting of the words is undated, and was published posthumously.

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heav'n, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.

Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art.
Visit us with thy salvation;
enter ev'ry trembling heart.

Come, Almighty, to deliver,
let us all thy life receive.
Suddenly return, and never,
nevermore thy temples leave.

Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish, then, thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee.

Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.

Bryan Kelly (1934-) is from Oxford, and sang as a boy in the choir of Worcester College. He studied with Herbert Howells at the Royal College of Music, and with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. He had a career teaching in conservatoires or music colleges in places as diverse as Glasgow, London, America, Italy, France, and Egypt. His compositions are mainly for orchestra or instruments, but include a number of pieces of church music, of which this lively setting of Wesley's hymn *Love's redeeming work is done* is one of his more recent.

Love's redeeming work is done,
Fought the fight, the battle won.
Lo, our Sun's eclipse is o'er!
Lo, he sets in blood no more!
Vain the stone, the watch, the seal!
Christ has burst the gates of hell;
Death in vain forbids him rise;
Christ has opened paradise.

Lives again our victorious King;
Where, O death, is now thy sting?
Dying once, he all doth save;
Where thy victory, O grave?
Hail the Lord of earth and heaven!
Praise to thee by both be given:
Thee we greet triumphant now;
Hail, the Resurrection thou!

Biographies

Dónal McCann Organ

Originally from Belfast, Dónal read music at King's College, Cambridge, where he was an academic and organ scholar, and accompanied the choir in daily chapel services, as well as in recordings, broadcasts and extensive tours, including to America and Australia. Prior to this, Dónal was the Andrew Lloyd Webber Scholar at Eton College, where he gained the FRCO with the Limpus Prize, subsequently being nominated for the Silver Medal of the Worshipful Company of Musicians. The following year he won the inaugural Dame Gillian Weir Medal at the Northern Ireland International Organ Competition.

Dónal studied piano at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, and organ with Professor Gerard Gillen at St Mary's Pro Cathedral. He has performed as a soloist with the Ulster Orchestra and the Academy of Ancient Music, and has given many recitals in the UK and abroad.

He is currently Director of Chapel Music at Winchester College.

James Brown Conductor

James Brown was organ scholar of Girton College, Cambridge before doing further study of organ with Lionel Rogg at the Geneva Conservatoire, Switzerland. After two years as Guest Artist in Residence at the First United Methodist Church, Lubbock, Texas, USA, he returned to England where he was Organist of Dean Close School.

In 2006 James moved to Oxford where he is Organist of the historic University Church, and teaches organ at Abingdon School as well as pursuing freelance work as an organist and pianist. He is also Organist at St John's College. In 2023 he was appointed Director of Music at Mansfield College.

James has given recitals in the UK, USA, Belgium and Switzerland, and appeared on both BBC radio and television. He also performs solo classical piano recitals for Cunard, P&O, and Fred Olsen cruise lines, and appeared as the solo classical artist on the Cunard flagship Queen Mary 2 twice in 2023.

James has been conducting the Cherwell Singers since 2007.

The Cherwell Singers

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Stephanie Garner
Judith Homann
Elina Screen
Judith Ward
Lucy Watson

Alto

Jenny Ayres
Elizabeth Kreager
Ann Leggett
Wendy Morris
Claire Naylor
Anna Orłowska

Tenor

Simon Murray
David Read
Brian Tibbels

Bass

David Gillespie
Paul Hodges
Simon Jones
Brian Leach
Kieran Suchet
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If you are interested in joining us please contact James Brown at:
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