



William  
**MATHIAS**  
Choral Music

A May Magnificat  
Learsongs  
Riddles

St John's Voices  
The Gentlemen of St John's  
Graham Walker, Director

<div>William</div> <div>MATHIAS</div> <div>(1934–1992)</div>		
Choral Music		
1	<b>A Babe is Born, Op. 55</b> (1971) (Text: 15th century)	<b>3:16</b>
	<b>Jesus College Canticles, Op. 53</b> (1970)	<b>6:53</b>
2	Magnificat (Text: Luke 1: 46-55)	4:07
3	Nunc Dimittis (Text: Luke 2: 29-32)	2:42
	<b>Learsongs</b> (1988) (Text: Edward Lear, 1812–1888)	<b>16:10</b>
4	Calico Pie	1:47
5	The Owl and the Pussycat	3:48
6	The Duck and the Kangaroo	2:30
7	Uncle Arly	5:26
8	The Pelican Chorus	2:34
9	<b>Y nefoedd sydd yn datgan gogoniant Duw</b> (‘The Heavens Declare the Glory of God’) (1988) (Text: Psalm 19)	<b>8:51</b>
10	<b>Ave verum corpus</b> (1992) (Text: 14th century, attrib. Pope Innocent VI)	<b>4:28</b>
	<b>Riddles</b> (1987) (Text: The Exeter Book [translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland, b. 1941] and William Mathias)	<b>21:40</b>
11	Introduction and I.	3:38
12	II.	3:20
13	III.	1:42
14	IV.	2:01
15	V.	2:03
16	VI.	4:08
17	VII.	4:48
18	<b>A May Magnificat, Op. 79, No. 2</b> (1978) (Text: Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1844–1889)	<b>9:46</b>

## William Mathias (1934–1992)

### Choral Music

One of the most significant Welsh composers of the 20th century, William Mathias was born on 1 November 1934 at Whitland in South West Wales. He studied with professor Ian Parrott at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, and subsequently at the Royal Academy of Music, where his teachers included Sir Lennox Berkeley (composition) and Peter Katin (piano). From 1970 to 1988 he was professor and head of the department of music at the University College of North Wales, Bangor. Active as a conductor and pianist as well as a composer, he took part in several first performances of his own works and was artistic director of the North Wales Music Festival from its inception in 1972 until his untimely death at the age of 57 on 29 July 1992.

His prolific output ranges widely from carols and church music to chamber and keyboard works and music for the theatre, cinema and television. Chief among his orchestral pieces are three symphonies (a fourth for the Santa Fe Symphony Orchestra was unfinished at the time of his death), three concertos for piano and one each for organ, harpsichord, harp, flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and violin and a series of atmospheric single movement ‘musical landscapes of the mind’: *Laudi* (1973), *Vistas* (1975), *Helios* (1977) and *Requiescat* (1978). Other important compositions include three string quartets, two piano sonatas, an opera *The Servants* (1977–80) after Iris Murdoch, and three large-scale works for chorus and orchestra: the cantata *This World’s Joie* (1974); the requiem *Lux Aeterna* (1982), and *World’s Fire* (1989), on the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Mathias regarded music first and foremost as an expressive medium and held the view that it could be an act of praise. His compositions often convey joy and exaltation and these qualities are perhaps most clearly represented in his substantial catalogue of works for choir and in particular his settings of sacred texts. His most celebrated and imperishable choral piece is the rousing secular carol *Sir Christêmas*, though, as all the works on this release readily attest, the rest of his output in this genre is also memorable and built to last.

*A Babe is Born*, for mixed chorus and organ, *Op. 55* (1971) is a lively, dance-like carol which sets an anonymous, early English 15th-century text. There is an invigorating energy and vitality to Mathias’s writing, which is enhanced by textural clarity and enlivened by a deft use of syncopation. The carol was commissioned by the Cardiff Polyphonic Choir, who premiered it under the baton of Roy Bohana at the choir’s Christmas Recital in Llandaff Cathedral, 1971.

The *Jesus College Canticles, Op. 53* (1970) consist of a setting for mixed chorus and organ of the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*. With the notable exception of an unexpectedly sombre and measured treatment of the words, ‘For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden’, the *Magnificat* is rhythmically urgent and often floridly melismatic, creating an effective foil to the quiet, chant-like opening of the *Nunc Dimittis*. Written for the master and fellows of Jesus College, Cambridge, these canticles were first performed by the Choir of Jesus College in the College Chapel on 6 March 1971.

*Learsongs*, for soprano and alto chorus and piano duet (1988) consists of droll settings of five nonsense poems by Edward Lear (1812–1888), which mirror the writer’s quirky humour. *Calico Pie* is built upon the repetition of tiny motifs and phrases, a favourite creative device of the composer that gives so many of his scores a powerful structural coherence. *The Owl and the Pussycat* is a languid, dreamy barcarolle which explores the vein of melancholy lurking behind much of Lear’s anarchic wit. There is a folk-like immediacy to the unfolding of the tale of *The Duck and the Kangaroo*, which imitates the hopping of the two protagonists. The languorous musical depiction of *Uncle Arly* with its pervasive repeated-note figure captures the wistfulness of Lear’s description of the aged relative. *The Pelican Chorus* has a bright and crisp, toccata-like energy. Towards the end of this final number, material from the opening setting of *Calico Pie* is reintroduced, suggesting that this collection of songs was conceived as a cycle. Commissioned by the 1989 Toronto

International Choral Festival, Learsongs was premiered by the Toronto Children's Chorus conducted by Jean Ashworth Bartle in the Cathedral of St James, Toronto on 15 June 1989.

*Y nefoedd sydd yn datgan gogoniant Duw* ('The Heavens Declare the Glory of God') (1988) is an impassioned anthem for mixed chorus and organ. Two spirited and declamatory outer sections frame a mysterious central episode with solos for baritone, tenor, alto and soprano in turn. In a transitional section, 'Alleluias' in dotted-rhythms are punctuated by dark, numinous sequences for organ that are quintessential Mathias. In the ecstatic final section, the 'Alleluias' return and the work ends in a spirit of rapturous celebration. This setting of Psalm 19 was commissioned by St John's College, Cambridge on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the translation of the Bible into Welsh. It was first performed on 25 September 1988 at the North Wales Music Festival, St Asaph Cathedral by the choir of St John's College, Cambridge, conducted by George Guest.

One of the composer's last completed works, *Ave verum corpus* (1992) was published after his death. This haunting motet for mixed chorus and organ begins with enigmatic, veiled organ chords and gradually increases in intensity before returning to the uncanny atmosphere of the opening. It was premiered on 13 March 1993 at the Tabernacle Chapel, Morriston by the Pembrokeshire Youth Choir conducted by John S. Davies.

*Riddles*, for six solo voices, mixed chorus, bells and piano (1987) sets seven Anglo-Saxon riddles from the *Exeter Book* translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland and includes framing verse and linking texts written by the composer. The soloists set the seven riddles and the large choir attempts to find their solution, but they are by no means always successful at the first attempt. Mathias offers musical clues, such as chiming vocal lines in the first riddle, the gentle rippling pulse of the second, the baritone's harsh repeated chattering in the third, an ominous increase in intensity in the fourth, weeping falling phrases in the fifth and timeless vistas opened up in the sixth. The self-referential solution to the final riddle is fittingly climactic and rounds off the rondo-like structure to

the listener's satisfaction. Mathias's judicious use of piano and bells helps to reinforce the rules of the game. He noted in his preface to the score that 'Just like a riddle, this work for voices is intended to be both serious and entertaining at one and the same time.' *Riddles* was commissioned by the Vancouver Chamber Choir, who first performed it with The King's Singers, conducted by Jon Washburn on 6 February 1988 at the Orpheum Theatre, Vancouver.

*A May Magnificat*, Op. 79, No. 2 (1978), for double chorus and chime bars is a variegated setting of words by Gerard Manley Hopkins. In a prefatory note in the score, the composer stipulates that the two choirs should be of equal size and 'clearly distanced one from the other to produce a marked antiphonal effect'. Mathias also wrote:

The whole of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem 'The May Magnificat' is set, but the work also incorporates a significant part of my setting of the *Magnificat* written in 1971 for Jesus College, Cambridge. The 'Jesus Service' was to English words; here it is set in Latin, so as to provide an archetypal contrast within the context of Hopkins's poem.'

This fluent and continuous cantata-like piece incorporates successfully a series of subtly contrasting passages, varying in mood and tempo, yet always carrying the music forward. The text's judicious blending of the sacred with the natural world is the perfect catalyst for Mathias's sometimes ecstatic, sometimes rapt and often incantatory music. This radiantly beautiful piece finds the composer at his most lucid and directly communicative and the constant varieties of expression, character and timbre ensure that a beguiling freshness is maintained from beginning to end. Written for the 25th Cork International Choral and Folk Dance Festival, it was premiered by the Bangor University College Singers, conducted by Gwyn L. Williams at the Aula Maxima, University College, Cork on 5 May 1978.

Paul Conway

## St John's Voices

Founded in 2013, St John's Voices is already developing an enviable reputation for its high-quality and emotionally charged performances. Established in order to sing evensong weekly in the College Chapel, the Voices have already established themselves as one of the most quickly evolving and ambitious choirs in Cambridge. They undertook their first foreign tour in December 2015, and performed *Messiah* to sell-out halls in Hong Kong and Singapore in 2016, and plans are developing for tours to the US, Canada and Colombia. St John's College Cambridge was founded in 1511 by Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII. The College choir began singing in the Chapel in the 1670s, and since the 1950s it has developed into one of the world's most distinguished choirs. Music of all kinds plays an important role in College life, from Jazz at John's to the new St John's Festivals. Musical alumni of the College include singers Iestyn Davies and Simon Keenlyside and composers Robin Orr and Jonathan Harvey.

## Gentlemen of St John's

The Gentlemen of St John's is a professional vocal ensemble made up of the choral and organ scholars of the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge. The Gents are particularly noted for their versatility, with a repertoire ranging from early sacred music and folk songs to more modern close-harmony arrangements of jazz standards, pop classics, and contemporary hits. In recent years, the Gents have performed at Cadogan Hall, the Royal Albert Hall and the Sydney Opera House, and recent performances have taken them to Hong Kong, Singapore, the US, Germany, France, and the Netherlands. In addition to frequent broadcasts with the full choir, the Gents were recent guests on Radio 3's *In Tune*. They also enjoy regularly leading workshops in the UK and abroad. The Gents have built up an extensive discography, and in December of 2017, the Gents released their latest album, *White Christmas*.

## Graham Walker

The award-winning cellist and conductor Graham Walker was educated at St John's College, Cambridge and the Royal Academy of Music. As a cellist he has performed as a soloist and chamber musician in many of the world's most prestigious halls. He is much in demand as a choral director, and is precentor and director of music at Magdalene College, director of St John's Voices at St John's College, and musical director of the New Cambridge Singers. As a result of his work with Classico Latino, the innovative Latin/classical crossover ensemble, in 2011 he was awarded a plaque on Colombian national TV in recognition of his 'outstanding contribution to Colombian Andean music'. His first two albums with Karolos, of chamber music by Stephen Dodgson, received rave reviews in the music press.





The Gentlemen of St John's

Photo: James Beddoe



Graham Walker

Photo: Jimmy Chan



St John's Voices

Photo: James Proctor

William Mathias wrote some of the most imaginative, communicative and joyful choral music of the mid- to late 20th century. These qualities are perhaps most clearly represented in his substantial catalogue of works for choir and, in particular, his settings of sacred texts, notably the invigorating *A Babe is Born* and the hauntingly beautiful *Ave verum corpus*, one of his last compositions. This selection also includes the both serious and entertaining sequence of *Riddles* and the rapt, ecstatic *A May Magnificat*. More Mathias choral music can be heard on 8.573523.

William  
**MATHIAS**  
(1934–1992)

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<b>9</b>	<b>Y nefoedd sydd yn datgan gogoniant Duw</b> (‘The Heavens Declare the Glory of God’) (1988)	<b>8:51</b>
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**\* WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

**Hugh Crook** **1 9**, **Shanna Hart** **2 3 10**, **Organ**  
**Glen Dempsey** **4–8**, **Aïda Lahlou** **4–8**, **Marie-Noëlle Kendall** **11–17**, **Piano**  
**David Ellis**, **Bells** **11–17**, **Chime bars** **18**

**The Gentlemen of St John’s** **11–17**  
**St John’s Voices • Graham Walker, Director**

A detailed track list can be found on page 2 of the booklet.

The available sung texts can be accessed at [www.naxos.com/libretti/574162.htm](http://www.naxos.com/libretti/574162.htm)

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