



## Once More, With Passion

**Award-winning Choir of Merton College Oxford marks return of Passiontide at Merton festival (8-10 April 2022) with compelling programme of music ancient and modern**

**Highlights include Mozart's Mass in C minor, world premieres of works by Francis Grier, recent compositions by Cheryl Frances-Hoad, Judith Bingham and James MacMillan, and sublime sacred polyphony by Gesualdo, Tallis, Byrd and Lassus**

The already weighty book of Oxford success stories has been enlarged in recent years thanks to the Choir of Merton College. Rave reviews for its recordings, prestigious prizes and a loyal following for its annual Passiontide at Merton festival have reinforced the international status of one of British choral music's finest products. Passiontide at Merton is set to resume next month after a two-year break: its latest edition opens on Friday 8 April at Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford with Mozart's Mass in C minor, featuring Rowan Pierce and Katie Bray among its soloists, and period performance specialists Florilegium conducted by Benjamin Nicholas.

Passiontide at Merton extends across the weekend with a celebration of sacred music in the thirteenth-century Chapel of Merton College, famed as much for its majestic acoustics as for its uplifting architecture. Merton Choir and its Director of Music Benjamin Nicholas share the bill with an impressive line-up of guest artists. Margaret Phillips will perform a programme of works by J.S. Bach on the chapel's exquisite Dobson organ on the morning of Saturday 9 April, including the Passacaglia in C minor BWV 582. The Gesualdo Six and its director Owain Park explore the power and the passion of polyphony for Holy Week by Tallis, Gesualdo and Victoria interleaved with recent works by Judith Bingham and Cheryl Frances-Hoad, before Merton's organ scholar Owen Chan performs Julius Reubke's monumental *Sonata on the 94<sup>th</sup> Psalm*, a Lisztian landmark of Romantic organ music.

Saturday's Choral Evensong, sung by Merton College Choir under Benjamin Nicholas, includes Frances-Hoad's *The Merton Responses*, one of a series of new works rising from the composer's ongoing tenure as Merton's visiting Research Fellow in the Creative Arts, and Gerald Finzi's festival anthem *Lo, the full, final sacrifice*. The day closes with *Compline*, the ancient nocturnal service of stillness and contemplation.

Passiontide at Merton resumes on 10 April with the Procession and Sung Eucharist for Palm Sunday, complete with Ralph Vaughan Williams' Mass in G minor and works by Orlando Gibbons and Orlando de Lassus. The festival concludes with a Choral and Organ Concert for Palm Sunday, comprising the world premiere performances of Francis Grier's motet for Merton, *Osanna filio David*, and *A Celebration for All Saints*, a substantial new organ work written for Stephen Farr, and motets by Byrd, Purcell, Poulenc and MacMillan.

Merton College Choir was reformed following the creation of Merton's Choral Foundation in 2008. It made its debut later that year under the joint direction of Peter Phillips, founder and conductor of the Tallis Scholars, and Benjamin Nicholas, and launched Passiontide at Merton in 2010. Each year the Choir recruits thirty undergraduates and graduates from across the University of Oxford. Since his appointment as Merton's organist and Director of Music in 2008, Benjamin Nicholas has directed the Choir in a series of critically acclaimed albums for the Delphian label. Their world premiere recording of Gabriel Jackson's *The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ* was named Best Choral Album at the 2020 BBC Music Magazine Awards.

"Merton used to have a choir of volunteers recruited each year by the College's organ scholar," Nicholas recalls. "Now almost all our singers are choral scholars who produce a consistently high standard. The Choir's weekly schedule is much fuller than it once was; we rehearse on Monday and sing services on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Evensong on Wednesday is sung by our girl choristers, who attend ten different schools, including in Blackbird Leys, Didcot and across Oxford. The girls will take part in the C minor Mass, which will be a first for them."

Nobody foresaw when Passiontide at Merton was last held in 2019 that a global pandemic would force its cancellation for the next two years. Merton College Choir, also silenced by Covid-induced public health precautions, was able to resume its weekly round of sung services last September. The intervening period has seen an encouraging return of congregations and audiences to Oxford.

“Attendance has been as high as ever for services this term, and we’ve seen full houses at the Sheldonian,” notes Benjamin Nicholas. “Of course, the Choir lost a considerable period of singing together because of the pandemic. But we’ve been back in the choir stalls for over six months now and are making sure that the standard repertoire is in everyone’s bones. We did the Vaughan Williams Mass in G minor in a recent chapel service for the first time in four years, and I think they were blown away by it,” he recalls. “They’re ready now for Merton’s Palm Sunday service. It has been great to get things in shape with a group that includes many fine new singers. We’re looking forward to seeing our audience again, including those who come to stay with us at Merton for the weekend.”

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**The information in this press release was correct at the time of sending. Please check the choir’s website and social media for the latest updates.**

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**FRIDAY 8 APRIL 2022**

**Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, 7.30pm**

**Merton College Choir | Merton College Girl Choristers | Benjamin Nicholas conductor | Rowan Pierce soprano | Katie Bray mezzo-soprano | James Oxley tenor | Giles Underwood bass | Florilegium**

**Mozart** Symphony No.36 in C major K425 ‘Linz’  
**Mozart** Mass in C minor K427

**SATURDAY 9 APRIL 2022**

**Merton College Chapel, Oxford, 11.30am**

**Margaret Phillips** organ

**J.S. Bach** Prelude & Fugue in C minor BWV 546  
**J.S. Bach** Chorale prelude on *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* BWV 618  
**J.S. Bach** Chorale prelude on *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* BWV 656  
**J.S. Bach** Trio Sonata No.4 in E minor BWV 528  
**J.S. Bach** Chorale prelude *Wir danken dir, Herr Jesu Christ* BWV 623  
**J.S. Bach** Chorale prelude *O Mensch, beweine dein’ Sünde* BWV 622  
**J.S. Bach** Passacaglia in C minor BWV 582

**Merton College Chapel, Oxford, 3.30pm**

**The Gesualdo Six | Owain Park** director

**Tallis** *Lamentations of Jeremiah*: Part 1  
**Judith Bingham** *Watch with me*  
**Gesualdo** *Tenebrae Responsories*  
**Byrd** *Miserere Mei, Deus*  
**Victoria** *Tenebrae Responsories*  
**Cheryl Frances-Hoad** *In the Crypt of the Wood*  
**Tallis** *Lamentations of Jeremiah*: Part 11

### **Merton College Chapel, Oxford, 5.30pm**

Owen Chan organ

Reubke *Sonata on the 94th Psalm*

### **Merton College Chapel, Oxford, 6pm**

Choral evensong with the Choir of Merton College (works by Poulenc, Frances-Hoad, Howells, Finzi, Liszt)

### **Merton College Chapel, Oxford, 9.30pm**

Compline

## **SUNDAY 10 APRIL**

### **Merton College Chapel, Oxford, 10:30am**

Procession and sung eucharist for Palm Sunday with the Choir of Merton College (works by Gibbons, Vaughan Williams, Lassus, CocherEAU)

### **Merton College Chapel, Oxford, 5pm**

Choir of Merton College | Benjamin Nicholas conductor | Stephen Farr organ

Byrd *Civitas sancti tui*

Purcell *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei*

Poulenc *Tenebrae factae sunt*

James MacMillan *Miserere*

Francis Grier *Osanna filio David* (world premiere)

Francis Grier *A Celebration for All Saints* (world premiere)

## **THE CHOIR OF MERTON COLLEGE**

The Choir of Merton College consists of 30 undergraduate and graduate students at Oxford University reading for degrees in a variety of subjects. The choir's primary duty is singing regular services in the famous 13th-century Chapel.

Since the establishment of Merton's Choral Foundation in 2008, the choir has gained an international reputation for offering the best of choral music through tours, recordings and broadcasts. The choir won the 2020 award for best choral album at the BBC Music Magazine Awards for its recording of Gabriel Jackson's *The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*. The choir's discography on the Delphian label has seen numerous five-star reviews and many recordings have been named 'Editor's Choice' by Gramophone magazine.

The choir has recently appeared at The Three Choirs Festival, the Cheltenham Music Festival, the concert series at St John's Smith Square, Cadogan Hall and The Temple Church. The choir is regularly heard in concert with orchestra: recent collaborations have seen the choir perform with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (Elgar's *The Apostles*), Instruments of Time and Truth (Bach's *St Matthew Passion*) and Oxford Baroque (Bach's *Mass in B minor*). The choir's annual festival, Passiontide at Merton, has an established place in Oxford's musical calendar, and has led to exciting collaborations with such groups as The Cardinal's Musick and The Marian Consort.

Merton College Choir regularly tours overseas, recently visiting the USA, Hong Kong and Singapore, France, Italy and Sweden. In 2017, the choir sang the first Anglican Service in St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

The choir's commitment to contemporary music has seen numerous composers write for the choir. The choir has premiered works by Kerry Andrew, Birtwistle, Chilcott, Dove, Ešenvalds, Frances-Hoad, Kendall, MacMillan, McDowall, Rutter, Tabakova and Weir. In 2021, the choir gave the world premiere of a new work by Daniel Kidane.