

## ***Composition Competition***

For better or worse, knowledge of Latin was dropped as an entry requirement to the University in 1960. Indeed nowadays, *perhaps* with the exception of classicists, the average student is able to pass his or her time at the College without much interaction with the language, let alone a working comprehension.

Surprisingly, however, one place in College where the ancient tongue is still going strong is the dining hall. Every day at 19:15 sharp, the fellow presiding at high table strikes the well-worn gavel and, Monday to Saturday, the College grace is recited by an attending classicist. This is all very pleasant, but Sunday evening is where the real pomp and ceremony is to be found. Charged from the excitement of evensong (and the sherry thereafter), the occupants of the seats of the central table – the College choir – rise to their feet simultaneously with the gavel-clout and, after a preparatory beat from the organ scholar, burst, at a *very* hearty tempo, (a sign of enthusiasm or hunger) into song.

The version sung – the current “short” grace – was set to music by Christopher Tolman. It was written in May 1998 during his time in the College Choir and studying History and Economics at Christ Church, with a dedication to Gavin Milmer, the then organ scholar, and to the choir. Ever since, it has been used every Sunday in term time to give thanks for, and to announce in grandeur, the evening’s feast.

At Gaudies and special college meals, however, the Long Grace is used: this is a composition of the 17th century by John Reading, with words giving thanks for Sir Thomas White and his family. The latter work, part of the tradition of St John’s, and an old friend of many alumni (if those attending the September gaudy are anything to go by) will be kept, but the College is opening a competition to compose a new setting of the short grace.

This competition is open to the junior, middle, senior and alumni common rooms and to current staff, and it is hoped that as many alumni as possible might want to take this opportunity to leave a very audible legacy to the college. Entries for the competition will be accepted from the 1st January 2012 until 12 noon on 16th April 2012. Two copies of your handwritten or computer-processed scores, plus the covering sheet available from the College website, must be sent via (internal or external) post to the organ scholar. A winner will be announced by the 1st May 2012 and will be awarded £100. Two runners-up will receive £50. The three will be then invited to dine at high table at Sunday formal hall for the first performance of the new Grace before the end of Trinity term. From then on, this new setting will be used alongside the Tolman version.

What are the judges looking for? Well Tolman, now Head of Economics at Harrow School, who will be sitting on the judging panel, describes the current setting as “deliberately rousing, but also purposefully over-the-top”.

Whether or not the new version is true to this description, he states he will be looking for “a crowd-pleaser”. Other judges will include Revd Elizabeth Macfarlane, college chaplain and Francis Goodburn, the current organ scholar.

So, good luck and get composing! Who knows – the winning grace from this competition may be as successful as Reading’s and still be with the College in 400 years?

The compulsory covering sheet, words to be set, full competition rules are available on the College website or upon request by writing to the organ scholar at the College’s postal address. If you have any questions about the competition, please write to [organ.scholar@sjc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:organ.scholar@sjc.ox.ac.uk).