Joyful Noises

“Your wooden arm you hold outstretched to shake with passers-by.”

Anniversaries of moment:
Tops on the list is the birthday of John Harvard, beneficent man of mystery, who was baptized in London at Southwark Cathedral on November 29, 1607. For news of celebrations in Cambridge, see page 78.

Actor and writer Jim Cooke reminds this magazine that in 1807 the United States agreed to establish diplomatic relations with Russia and that John Quincy Adams, A.B. 1787, LL.D. 1822, was its first minister. To help mark that bicentennial, the U.S. embassy in Moscow invited Cooke to go to Russia in October to portray Adams in three solo performances. In life, reportedly, he was aloof, stiff-necked, and dour. Ralph Waldo Emerson, A.B. 1821, LL.D. ’66, called him a “bruiser” and imagined he “must have sulfuric acid in his tea.” He went on to become the sixth president of the United States, the first president to be the son of a president, and—a recent study contends—the president with the highest IQ of any to date.

Student radio station WHRB is renowned for its musical “orgies,” enjoyed twice a year during exam periods. Last May’s offerings included 70 hours of Brahms, 53 of Stravinsky, and an eight-hour “Fruit Cocktail Orgy,” billed in the schedule as follows: “In 1927, American fruit canners agreed upon a standard recipe for fruit cocktail. To be considered a true fruit cocktail, pears, grapes, cherries, and peaches must be included in the mix.” (A search of the culinary collection at the Schlesinger Library by reference librarian Sarah Hutchison, to discover the precise percentages of grapes and so on in the 1927 recipe, did not bear fruit.) “In celebration of the eightieth anniversary of this well-loved dish,” WHRB continued, “we serve up a sweet and tasty mixture of fruits... From pop to electronica, noise to ‘avant garage,’ bands in all genres have named themselves after their favorite fruits. We bring you the original recipe, Pere Ubu, A Grape Dope, The Cherry Point, and Peaches, as well as a tantalizing menu of other fruit-inspired bands.”

Something altogether different: The best thing about going to church is that one gets to sing hymns, and Primus has always been grateful to Harvard’s Memorial Church for providing a hymnal in which the tunes are pitched low enough so that he, of challenged vocal range, can sing their melodies, which he is rarely able to do in other churches. The compilers of the third edition of the Harvard University Hymn Book (1964) explained their reasoning: “Since one of the chief functions of this hymnal is to serve at daily morning prayer services at an hour early enough to make singing in high keys uncomfortable, and because the congregation is still predominantly male despite the increasingly coeducational character of the University community, we have set the hymns in lower keys than is customary.” The preface to the fourth edition, just published by Harvard University Press, offers no such reassurance about pitch. Primus fears he’ll be screeching.

He had more to be thankful for in the old hymnal than pitch set low, says Carson Cooman, research associate in music at the church and principal author of the notes on the hymns in the new edition. Earlier compilers found hymns with gospel or evangelical associations unacceptable and favored “the Scottish and Genevan Psalters and the chorale tradition. Most of the hymns in these genres have very limited melodic compasses, as compared to, say, Victorian hymns, which have wider singing ranges.”

The new book has 100 or so more hymns than its predecessor, a less austere menu of hymnody for a more diverse congregation. It brings back many Victorian tunes and adds more recent ones, sometimes taxing to a sinner’s voice. “We have not hesitated, for example,” writes the Reverend Peter J. Gomes, Pusey minister in the Memorial Church, in his preface, “to include Robert Lowry’s 1864 Victorian thumper, ‘Shall We Gather at the River.’” Primus will do his best, and beg the indulgence of his pew mates.

—PRIMUS V