“Saints and Angels”: a Workshop for Singers, with Simon Harper

On Saturday 26th September, 2026, a substantial number of BMEMF singers met to sing music linked with *Saints and Angels*, under the direction of Simon Harper, in the Bishop’s Palace, Hereford.

Simon had put together a programme of 6 contrasting pieces, each for a Saint, or Angel, or Angels:

> *Cantantibus organis* by Peter Philips, for Cecila, patron saint of musicians and organ builders;
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> *Alma Redemptoris Mater* by Victoria, for the mother of our redeemer;
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> *Gloria in excelsis Deo* by Thomas Weelkes, “ … lay the angels’ choir abroad”;
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> *Tu es Petrus* by Palestrina, for Peter;
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> *Factum est silentium* by Richard Deering, concerning the battle between the dragon and the Archangel Michael;
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> *Gaude et Laetare*, by Sweelinck, “Rejoice and be glad, O Virgin Mary”.

Our six composers lived at various times between 1525 and 1630, or 1548 and 1630 if we discount Palestrina, who was born about 1525. As Simon pointed out, birth dates were often not as precisely recorded as death dates.

Thus the music is 400 to 500 years old, and we are singing it still. Indeed, we are probably singing it more now than in many of the intervening years. But the building we were singing in is 400 to 500 years older than the music!

The Bishop’s Palace was built in 1180, or thereabouts, most probably under Bishop Robert Foliot (1173-86). According to the Archeology Data Service (archaeologydataservice.ac.uk), “At present the hall is probably the oldest standing building in Britain exactly dated by dendrochronology”. It was possible to determine a felling date of 1179 for one of the major timbers.

The timber frame of the building is now concealed behind much more modern internal plastered facing, although there a couple of panels which can be hinged away to reveal the 12th century timbers. The hard surfaces, together with the quarter-spheres of the two roof ends, probably account for much of the acoustic, which is beautiful for singing.

Simon introduced each composer, and each text. Several of the composers were Catholics, and spent much of their careers elsewhere in Europe in order to be free of the dominant Protestant pressures in England at the time. Peter Philips met John Bull in the Netherlands. John Bull was organist at Hereford Cathedral in the 1580s. He had fled England on a charge of adultery. Some of these musicians were not as staid as might be imagined: Simon described Thomas Weelkes as a rock-star musician, wild and rebellious, who, it is said, once urinated from the organ loft on to the Dean below him.

Far be it from me to comment on whether or not Simon is wild or rebellious, but he is rapidly establishing himself as an indispensable force in Herefordshire's music. He is a Tenor Lay clerk with the Hereford Cathedral Choir, with whom he has sung in the Sistine Chapel (Palestrina's *Tu es Petrus*), for D-Day anniversaries in Normandy, and toured the USA. Yet he also directs Hereford Chamber Choir, Cantores Chamber Choir in the Cotswolds, Ledbury Choral Society, Kington Choral Society, and the award-winning Cantabile Girls' Choir in Hereford Cathedral School, as well as giving singing lessons.

Soon after Simon first came to Hereford he heard that Hereford Chamber Choir were advertising for a Music Director. He asked his colleagues about the choir. They advised him not to apply, because the choir was said to be rather poor. Simon applied anyway, and it is a mark of his hard work that the choir has now, amongst many other achievements, performed at the Hay Festival and at two recent Three Choirs Festivals, and commissioned its own original choral works from Kerensa Briggs, Liz Dilnot Johnson, and Robert Peate.

He performed similar miracles with us. Well, perhaps he couldn't achieve quite so much in only a few hours. Nevertheless, our initial sight-reading of each piece—something of a rabble—quickly became genuinely musical, and ended up with a performance at the end of the day which would surely have matched the Sixteen, at least momentarily, on a well-tuned chord?

We were a choir of mixed abilities. Simon managed just the right balance between aiming for concert-quality perfection, and acquiring enjoyment through achievable quality. Sometimes he'd explain how he wanted a phrase to be shaped, then start us off to try it, only to stop us half way through the second note because the sound was all wrong, or because we had already dropped in pitch, or in tempo. He explained, "Do the phrasing as if you think it really works like that, even if you don't think that it does. Don't do it as if I've just told you to do it." As someone said to me in a break, "I've never had to work so hard in a workshop; and yet he gets the level just right".

At the end of the day we sang through all six pieces, very joyously, and, it seemed to me that we did real justice to the Bishops' Palace and our six composers. Simon clearly enjoyed himself, even though we made him very nearly late for cathedral evensong. And only once did he have to stop us after a missed entry, with "No, there's just no way back from that!"

Robert Edwards