



## Byrd in the City

London Choral Day 2023

**Monday 15 May 2023 (LJ 722)**

Price: £240 per person

Our *London Choral Days* present professional choral ensembles in beautiful and appropriate buildings. They take the form of a day-long sequence of three concerts interspersed with spoken commentary, walks (or Underground) between venues and a good lunch.

The Spring 2023 iteration is devoted to the music of William Byrd in the 400th anniversary of his death. The churches chosen are survivors of the Reformation, the Great Fire of 1666 and the Blitz: Byrd would have known them all – and almost certainly would have performed in at least one of them as a member of the Chapel Royal.

Good buildings architecturally by any standard, they differ from each other markedly, their start dates being spread across four centuries. Romanesque, Early Gothic and Late Gothic styles are thus on display in fine form.

An extraordinary and little-trumpeted feature of London is the presence of a remarkable collection of church, chapel and cathedral choirs. No other city on Earth can boast a couple of dozen first-rate ensembles consisting of professional singers and conducted by accomplished music directors who all enjoy a prestigious portfolio of musical employment. The three choirs attached to these churches are among the very best in the capital.

### The programme

#### St Bartholomew the Great

Begin at 11.30am at St Bartholomew the Great in Smithfield. The church is magnificent, a noble example of Romanesque, a style of building which has all but vanished elsewhere in London. The massive piers, round arches, broad side aisles, cavernous galleries and stone vaults create one of the most spiritually compelling spaces in the city.

It was built for an Augustinian priory founded in 1123 – the church celebrates its 900th anniversary this year. Though capacious, the surviving building comprises only the eastern parts of a once much larger structure, the nave having been demolished after dissolution in 1539.

The Director of Music, Rupert Gough, has devised a programme which alongside pieces by William Byrd (c. 1540–1623) presents some of his less fortunate Catholic colleagues who left England to compose and work abroad.



Peter Philips slipped away in 1582 and led a peripatetic life in Italy and the Low Countries, finishing at the Habsburg court in Brussels. Richard Dering seems to have converted while in the entourage of the English ambassador to Venice, though he returned to England as a member of Queen Henrietta Maria's court. Often in trouble, John Bull's claims concerning his religious conscience are less convincing; the immediate cause of his flight from England was the charge of adultery.

*For lunch, the audience is split between several restaurants near this venue in Smithfield and the next one on Tower Hill. Travel between the two locations is by Circle Line – five stops, no changes.*

*Illustration: St Bartholomew the Great, engraving from 'Some London Churches', publ. 1911.*

#### St Peter ad Vincula

The 1900 edition of Baedeker's London baldly states that, historically, the Tower of London is the most interesting spot in England. Nikolaus Pevsner claimed that it remains the most important work of military architecture in England. To attend a concert in the precincts is a rare privilege.

The current iteration of the Chapel of St Peter ad Vincula dates to 1520, and is like many another parish church of that period such as can be seen throughout England. There is a feature which is far from standard, however, which is that beneath the paving are the earthly remains of many who were beheaded nearby, including two Thomasses (More and Cromwell) and three queens – Anne Boleyn, Catherine Howard and Lady Jane Grey.

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continued

Members of the Choir of the Chapels Royal, HM Tower of London, directed by Master of Music Colm Carey, perform motets by William Byrd drawn largely from his 1589 *Cantiones Sacrae*. This highly expressive collection of choral chamber music – sacred texts but not intended for liturgical use – displays a darker, hidden side to Byrd’s personality and music. Persecution of Catholics was at an all-time high in the 1580s, and he responded with a number of anguished but sublimely beautiful motets.

*Another five stops on the Underground, Tower Hill to Temple – any train, no changes. Tea is served in Temple Church.*

#### Temple Church

The London base of the Knights Templar was established on this site around 1160; their circular chapel was consecrated in 1185 and survives as the nave. A replacement chancel, now much the larger part, was built under the patronage of Henry III and consecrated in 1240 – the king had intended it as his place of burial. This splendid space, a hall church with alarmingly slender columns of Purbeck marble, is a spectacular example of the Early English phase of Gothic architecture.

The choir here operates under two names, The Temple Church Choir which includes child choristers, and the Temple Singers which is adults only, the line-up for today. The guest conductor is Jeremy Summerly, director of studies at Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge and highly distinguished both as performer and musicologist in the world of Tudor music.

They perform Byrd’s ‘Great Service’, a set of canticles for the Anglican services of Mattins, Communion and Evensong. Probably composed late in Elizabeth’s reign, it is the last and most elaborate of his four services for the English liturgy. It was intended principally for the Chapel Royal and is in five parts plus organ.

#### Practicalities

**Start:** 11.30am at St Bartholomew-the-Great in Smithfield, EC1. Nearest stations: Barbican, Farringdon, St Paul’s. Doors open at 11.00am.

**Finish:** by 6.10pm at Temple. Nearest station: Temple, Blackfriars.

**Getting around.** The churches are situated on the periphery of the Square Mile. Travel between them is by Underground Railway (two journeys, each of five stops, no changes). There are nevertheless walks of about 15 minutes at most (waiting at pedestrian crossings included) between churches, restaurant and stations. You are of course welcome to arrange taxis if you wish.

**Price:** £240 per person. This includes admission to the three concerts and the precincts of the Tower, lunch and afternoon refreshments, programme booklet, the services of a number of staff. Underground fares are not included because many of you are entitled to free transport. Each of the two journeys costs £2.50, and fares for a day are capped at £7.70.

**Lunch and refreshments.** Lunch is in a selection of good restaurants near two of the concert venues. Audience members are arbitrarily pre-assigned to a particular one. Tea and biscuits are served in the afternoon before the last concert.

**Audience size:** between 100 and 150.