

Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*

Goldsmiths Hall, 17th March 2018

In the early 1970s when it was virtually impossible to hear a major choral work by Elgar other than *Gerontius* I diligently attended every performance I could reach. Ultimately this was my downfall. After 35 performances I could not bear to attend another. Not the fault of the work or necessarily the performance but my own driven hypersensitivity to each and every bar as I expected it to spring from my vocal score.

Having used "well the interval" this performance was greatly anticipated and thankfully in very large part my expectations were not denied. The banking of the choral forces with Bromley Boy Singers in an upper gallery as the semi-chorus of "tender beings angelical" added to a sense of spatial drama and theatricality which I'm sure Elgar sought.

Late 19th century traditions placed this astonishing masterpiece in the category of oratorio. Elgar himself never likes this appellation and it is nowhere near what it might rightly be titled. Sacred music drama? Possibly.

The opening prelude is really an almost Straussian tone poem of the drama to follow. The opening – redolent of plainsong and early church music – was played a little too loudly for my taste. It moves through Wagnerian chromaticism and startling dissonances to a broad diatonic march before collapsing with the dying Gerontius. There were a few, very few, moments of slightly sour woodwind intonation but overall I was swept along by a passionate, richly drawn and coloured interpretation.

As soon as Peter Davoren (Gerontius) entered I relaxed. Really clear diction, a richly lyrical voice, an "intelligent singer" which Elgar always sought; someone who acted the words. At a few moments of sustained passion there was a degree of "beat" in the voice but it could be argued that in his situation Gerontius would show stress. The Verdian *Sanctus fortis* was delivered with passion and conviction. Gerontius' final collapse led perfectly to his Part II entry *I went to sleep*. A voice to relish and an interpretation that will grow and be enhanced with further performances.

David Stout in the dual roles of Priest and the Angel of Agony was the bass I wanted. A real bass. The dual role is always problematic since the tessitura of both really demands different voices. The "above the stave" notes for the priest were a trifle strained but certainly did not detract from an impressive characterisation. The priest deals largely in a solidly comforting D major to send Gerontius from this world, and the Angel's farewell ends the work in the same key, settling him into his purgatorial bed. The Angel of the Agony has characteristically angular lines of loose almost non tonal form. This was most affectively sung, closing in a hushed tone – beautiful to hear in such a large voice.

Janet Shell replaced an indisposed Elisabeth Meister as the Angel. Have known Dame Janet Baker's performances for over 50 years and having heard her, Alfreda Hodgson and Margaret Cable in this role it is inevitably difficult not to see this as an alto role. In the score it is given to a mezzo soprano. I needed a few minutes to adjust but was delighted with the performance given; again, exemplary diction and musicality and a truly comforting close in *The Angel's Farewell*.

The choirs acquitted themselves wonderfully well. Vigour, passion, contrasts; all were here. The solemnity of the litanies, the blazing C major paeon of *Praise to the Holiest* and – hardest of all to bring off – *The Demons* chorus. In a word, it “worked”.

It was obvious that choir, soloists and orchestra, all under the most able baton of Dan Ludford-Thomas, love this great work and transmitted that affection to the audience.

I am so pleased that in the company of others I ventured out on a bitterly cold night to join Gerontius in a journey we are all bound one day to take. Hopefully it won't be long before I taste the delights of this profound and powerful music again.

Martin Passande

Martin Bull adds:

I am grateful to Mr Passande for correcting these few errors which crept into my programme notes, which he kindly said were otherwise “good and interesting”:

- Caroline Alice Roberts was not disinherited by her father. He was dead before she married. Her maiden aunts tied up her money in a trust so that neither her husband nor offspring could have it.
- The tenor in the first performance was Edward Lloyd (not Brema). The Angel was sung by Marie Brema (*an intended editorial slip, I'm afraid!*).
- Elgar's choral works were written for festivals in the West – not East – Midlands.