## Elgar

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*The Dream of Gerontius*

David Rendall (Gerontius) *ten*, Anne Sofie von Otter (Angel)
*mezzo sop*, Alastair Milne (Priest/Angel of the Agony) *bass*
London Symphony Orchestra
London Symphony Chorus
Sir Colin Davis *cond*

LSO live LSO0083 (2CDs: recorded in Direct Stream Digital: 92 minutes)
Notes and translations included.

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The popular 1930s broadcaster on music Sir Henry Walford Davies once advised listeners to an impending broadcast of *The Dream of Gerontius* to pay more attention to the orchestra than the voices. They would certainly have found plenty to engage their interest in this new recording, taken from a live performance at London's Barbican Hall, with Sir Colin Davies at the helm of the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO). All sorts of previously unnoticed orchestral details emerge without being unduly spot-lit, and Davies has an alert ear for Elgar's motivic structure. He responds readily to Elgar's marked tempo fluctuations – a bit too readily to maintain ideal momentum at times – and adds a few of his own.

The text of *The Dream of Gerontius* – by the Roman Catholic convert Cardinal John Henry Newman – is full of doctrine that had been rejected by the Protestant churches during the Reformation. The sole human character, the dying Gerontius (the name derives from the Greek geron, meaning 'old man'), prays for assistance to the Virgin Mary and other saints; and after his soul-searing encounter with God at the climax of Part Two, Gerontius does not simply pass into heaven, but is committed to Purgatory for a long, and possibly painful, process of purification. For some Protestants, this would have been dangerous heresy. When *Gerontius* was proposed some years later at the 1902 Three Choirs Festival, the Bishop of Worcester objected – and there were plenty who supported him. Performance in the Cathedral was only permitted once the text had been purged of 'popish' elements: the words 'Jesus', 'Lord' or 'Saviour' were substituted for 'Mary'; 'souls' for 'souls in purgatory'; 'prayers' for 'masses' and so on. It may seem faintly bizarre now, but in early twentieth-century England, these words were still acutely sensitive issues, as Elgar had discovered at the first performance of *Gerontius* some two years earlier.

It is certainly worth remembering that at its first performance, just over a century ago, *Gerontius* was thought by some to be outlandish, while its subject matter was viewed in other quarters with suspicion verging on paranoia. The first performance of *Gerontius* was on Wednesday morning, 3 October 1900, and was a near-disaster, as has often been recounted, but it was not wholly surprising. The chorus had had too little time to learn their far from easy parts because Novello had been behind in engraving them, and this was because Elgar had been so late correcting them. Jaeger (Elgar's publisher at Novello) kept warning him of the disaster ahead, as Novello also had to prepare the scores and parts for Parry's *De profundis* and Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha* trilogy at Birmingham, and

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the new works for the Hereford Festival in September. The orchestral rehearsal in London on 23 September was the first time Hans Richter, who was to conduct at 'the composer's request', had seen the complete work and he, the orchestra and soloists – Edward Lloyd, Marie Brema and Harry Plunket Greene – were not much more than sight-reading. At the combined rehearsal in Birmingham six days later, the *Demons' Chorus* came to serious grief. The chorus did not take it seriously and Elgar insulted them. Richter studied the score all weekend but it was too late in spite of an extra choral rehearsal on 1 October. Almost certainly, he had not expected a score of such innovation and difficulty. In any case, according to what one reads in letters by Wagner and Strauss, he was inclined to be lazy. To be fair to him, as conductor of the festival he also had to prepare and conduct over the four days *Elijah*, Parry's *De profundis*, the *Hiawatha* trilogy (which he called rubbish), *Israel in Egypt*, *Messiah*, Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, Dvořák's *The Spectre's Bride* and other miscellaneous orchestral works. To be fair to the chorus, too, which apparently sang badly throughout the festival, the chorus-master Swinnerton Heap had died suddenly aged 53 in June, and Stockley, aged 70, had been called in from retirement to take his place; the complexities of *Gerontius* were well beyond him.

The majority of critics, whilst realizing that the performance was totally inadequate, recognized that *Gerontius* was a work of genius, as did several visitors from Germany. But Elgar was in despair. He wrote to Jaeger on 9 October: 'Providence denies me a decent hearing of my work: so I submit – I always said God was against art & I still believe it: anything obscure or trivial is blessed in this world … I have allowed my heart to open once – it is now shut against every religious feeling & every soft, gentle impulse for ever.'[1] Less than three weeks later, he wrote, 'I really wish I were dead over & over again but I dare not, for the sake of my relations, do the job myself.'[2] It was characteristic Elgar self-dramatization, self-pity and depression. But he knew he had composed a masterpiece. In no previous English choral work had the orchestra had such a prominent part, being used as in a Wagner music-drama almost as the leading character. In no previous English work – and surely in no work of oratorio character – had soloists, chorus and orchestra been blended into such an organic whole. Indeed, Elgar was right to tell Jaeger that *Gerontius* was unclassifiable as oratorio or cantata – 'there's no word invented yet to describe it'.

And Dr Elgar was right. Musical terminology had not, and still remains to, come up with a word to describe the genre of work he had created in *Gerontius*. It is not an oratorio, or a cantata; not opera or music-drama. One might argue that it is a cross between some, or all, of these genres. The music, however, is indisputably Wagnerian. Elgar was a post-Wagnerian tonal composer, but for many English concert-goers in 1900 Wagner was still difficult modern music. Indeed, the work's Wagnerian tendencies were one of the reasons why people reacted so badly at its first performance. The *Demons' Chorus* and much of semi-chorus music came over particularly poorly at the Birmingham concert, and the writing for much of this music has its origins firmly rooted in Wagner's harmony, orchestration and leitmotiv techniques. For example, when Gerontius sings 'Mary, pray for me', we hear a moment particularly redolent of *Tannhäuser*, and there is also a moment that is distinctly *Meistersinger* in the choir of the Angelicals.

[1] Edward Elgar, *Letters to Nimrod*, ed. Percy M. Young (London: Denis Dobson, 1968), p. 109.

[2] Ibid., p. 113.

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However, the work's fortunes soon began to change, particularly when, after the 1901 German premiere of *Gerontius*, Richard Strauss publicly toasted Elgar as 'the first English Meister' – high praise indeed from the world's most celebrated Wagnerian. August Jaeger was also struck by the work's Wagnerian character and ambitions. While Elgar was still working on the score, he wrote 'Since Parsifal nothing of this mystic, religious kind of music has appeared to my knowledge that displays the same power and beauty as yours. Like Wagner you seem to grow with your greater, more difficult subject and I am now most curious and anxious to know how you will deal with that part of the poem where the Soul goes within the presence of the almighty. There is a subject for you!'[3]

Elgar learnt another important lesson from Wagner – though, as with every influence in *Gerontius*, he digested it so thoroughly that the listener hears only authentic Elgar. Before Wagner, operas and oratorios tended to be arranged in musical 'numbers': arias, duets, ensembles, choruses – all more or less detachable from the larger dramatic context. Wagner found a way of making dramatic works evolve continuously, seamlessly, like huge symphonies; Elgar achieves something very similar in *The Dream of Gerontius*. Some sections – like the Angel's beautiful lullaby 'Softly and gently' at the end of Part II – can be performed separately, with the help of a little surgery; but there are details (for instance, recollections of earlier leitmotivs) which only make complete sense if this music is heard in its proper place. And the sense of sustained symphonic current is essential to the work's message. Early in Part II, Gerontius's disembodied soul describes how 'a uniform and gentle pressure tells me that I am not self-moving. But borne forward on my way'. Elgar's music conveys the sense of that 'uniform and gentle pressure' with subtle power. We can feel that we too are 'borne forward', through the *Demons' Chorus*, through the angelic hymn 'Praise to the Holiest in the height', to the final, agonizing yet transfiguring encounter with God.

But at the crucial point in the story, Elgar's Wagnerian nerve temporarily failed him. 'Please remember that none of the "action" takes place in the presence of God', he replied to Jaeger. 'I would not have tried that, neither did Newman. The Soul says 'I go before my God' – but we don't – we stand outside'.[4] Fortunately, Jaeger was impressed, and began a campaign to get the composer to have another go: 'I have tried and tried and tried, but it seems to me the weakest page of the work! Do re-write it! … It seems mere whining to me and not at all impressive.'[5] At first Elgar resisted, but eventually he gave in; could it be that an inner voice was also telling him that Jaeger was right – that he had been too timid? The end result is perhaps the most original moment in the whole score and one that David brings to the fore with skill and ease. As Gerontius goes to be 'consumed, yet quicken'd, by the glance of God', there is an awe-inspiring crescendo; then the full orchestra, with organ and four percussionists, delivers a lacerating Parsifalian discord – but only for a split second: Elgar marks it *fffz-p*. The effect is like a blinding flash of light, infinitesimally brief, but leaving the eyes and brain reeling. Now we understand why Gerontius cries 'Take me away' – the music has made that quite clear.

English conductor Colin Davis turned to the music of Elgar only late in his career. One can easily understand why. When he first made his name in the early 1960s, Davis was known as a brilliant Mozart conductor, an insightful Stravinsky

3 Ibid., pp. 86–7.
4 Ibid., p. 83.
5 Ibid., p. 94.

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conductor and an inspired Tippett conductor. But while he later also became a noted Sibelius, Haydn and even Dvořák conductor, Davis almost entirely stayed away from the directly emotional Romanticism of Elgar until the early years of the twenty-first century. Then, in quick succession, he conducted and recorded all three of Elgar's symphonies, to be followed by *The Dream of Gerontius* in 2005. Davis manages to take a work lovingly encrusted with a thick coat of English sentimentality and blast it into the middle of next week. There is an incredible clarity to his conducting – not just musically, but emotionally too – that makes everything sound honest and sincere. Although the LSO and London Symphony Chorus (LSC) perform with mighty magnificence, they never get too thick, slow or heavy, as is so often the case with other Elgar recordings – most notably when Sir Simon Rattle is at the helm. Davis seems to blend a sense of the work's modernity with a central focus on its mystic subject matter, namely the journey of a man's soul after death. Now in the absolute prime of his artistry, Davis adds his always visceral style to the atmosphere of the work, lending it humanity whilst bringing to it more dramatic space than most performances offer. The direction of both the orchestra and chorus is exceptionally nuanced, whilst all three soloists are dedicated to their task, creating a unified interpretation.

All in all, it is a performance that works best in the withdrawn, inward passages. The *Prelude* to Part I really is fabulous. The orchestra manage to capture the tension, tenderness, beauty and mysticism of the whole work in a brief snapshot, somehow sounding fresh and new at the same time. It is as if we have never heard the *Prelude* before, and indeed we have not – not played like this anyway. However, the more obvious theatrical sections seem less successful somehow. The *Demons' Chorus* for example, goes at a heck of a lick (which is not necessarily a bad thing in itself), a bit too much so for the articulation in the fugue at 'dispossessed, aside thrust'; although it must be said here that the chorus is mercifully free from pantomime cackling. Elsewhere, the choral sound is finely balanced and I cannot recall the eight-part texture at the end of 'Praise to the Holiest' ever sounding cleaner. There is little bloom to the sound, though, especially in the sopranos, although I suspect that this has more to do with the Barbican's acoustic than the actual singing.

Much has been said of David Rendall's performance, so it was difficult to listen to the recording with an unbiased view of what was to come. Canadian tenor Ben Heppner was to have sung the title role but was indisposed on the day of the recording, so was speedily replaced by Rendall at the last minute. There are, as a result, definite hints of strain in Rendall's voice and it is not the most vocally distinguished performance that one could imagine. Rendall's nerves seem to get the better of him in *Gerontius*'s opening statements, which causes a rather unfortunate accentuation of his already pronounced vibrato. The persistent heavy vibrato unfortunately pervades the whole recording, resulting in often fairly approximate intonation. However, Rendall's sense of the text is excellent. Prayerful in the opening statement, he becomes gradually more agonized in the *Sanctus* before his soul goes on its unknown journey in Part II. Considering his lack of preparation, Rendell's rendition is impressive, but it is sad not to have had Happner singing the part.

But this recording has an ace up its sleeve in Anne Sofie von Otter's Angel. Von Otter delivers the most distinguished of performances. Her voice is darker than it once was and is consequently ideal for Elgar's material. As a great lieder singer, she brings out various textual details with unusual clarity, whilst her operatic background intensifies the drama of the piece. In particular, the

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lengthy narrative is well paced, showing von Otter's vocal reserves to the full. She has been a favourite singer of mine for years, so I am probably biased, but the warmth and tenderness in her voice can easily stand comparison with the likes of Janet Baker and Helen Watts, and her versatility leave her miles ahead of the relative newcomer Kozená in the mezzo stakes. The soft 'Alleluia' at the end of her first solo is one of the most magical passages in the whole performance and she maintains concentration in her great 'Farewell', in spite of Davis's almost indulgently slow tempo.

Alastair Miles has authority as the Priest in Part I but as the Angel of the Agony in Part II, he is frankly not agonized enough. Miles seems to highlight the more human side of the Angel, but what results is a somewhat tepid interpretation of the 'Jesu!' monologue. With music and text that should stir *Gerontius* (and the audience) to the very core of his being, Miles merely seems to make reasonable sense of the rhetoric, allowing the moment to slip by. However, his timbre is admirably controlled and focused, allowing his powerful bass voice to sound less histrionic and more dramatic: something I am sure Elgar would have approved of.

What sticks in the mind, however, is the glorious playing of the LSO and the singing of their colleagues in the LSC. We want to be overwhelmed by the power of the massed voices in this work, as the LSC are descendants of the English choral tradition, they do not disappoint. The words are splendidly pointed, whilst the coordination and balance of the ensemble, particularly in 'Praise to the Holiest', are admirable. It is ultimately a recording for all concerned to be proud of, and even if it is not one of the greatest recorded accounts, it is still worth hearing. The laurels, however, must surely go to von Otter for her stunning interpretation of the Angel and to Davis for his inspired reading.

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