

ELGAR'S 'DREAM OF GERONTIUS' *Aet. 50*

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FIFTY years have passed since Elgar's setting of Cardinal Newman's poem 'The Dream of Gerontius' was first performed at the Birmingham Festival. This great music now holds an established place in the general *répertoire* of choral societies: indeed, so secure is its present position that it is easy to forget how chequered has been its career in the half century, to what accidents it has been a prey, under what misunderstandings it has suffered—and does still suffer.

When 'Gerontius' first appeared, Elgar was just beginning to attract attention as a national rather than as a provincial composer, very largely because of the enthusiasm Hans Richter had shown in conducting the 'Enigma Variations'. Though the forty-three year old composer at this time, therefore, commanded a certain amount of respect among musicians, his new work must have seemed a strange affront to the old, but extremely vigorous, oratorio tradition of choral singing, well nurtured on a staple diet of Handel and Mendelssohn. Even Parry and other composers of the English musical renaissance of the last two decades of the nineteenth century had made no really significant advance in this *genre*, and while Elgar refrained from describing 'Gerontius' as an oratorio (although the proportions of the work make this seem a more suitable description than Jaeger's 'cantata') the new *durchkomponiert* setting of Newman's poem must have appeared as a determined tilt at the venerable oratorio tradition, to which indeed it virtually gave the death blow. Our larger choruses can nowadays contend successfully with the complexity of the choral writing, but it was a sizeable problem to choirs at the turn of the century. The Birmingham chorus did not know what to make of it: one performer was heard to express what seems to have been the general feeling with a certain vividness, 'Call this a "Dream"?—I call it a b—— nightmare!' Added to this, during the rehearsals for the first performance an unexpected disaster occurred in the death of the chorus-master, Dr Swinnerton Heap. The man who took over was W. C. Stockley, a highly respected Birmingham musician of the old school who had once conducted

an orchestra in which Elgar had played, but a man who had very little understanding of, or love for, 'Gerontius'. The chorus, which had much other music to prepare for the festival, was therefore inadequately rehearsed, and as Elgar himself had not been able to attend the early rehearsals he did not realise the full horror of things until too late. Unfortunately, Richter, who conducted, also seemed unfamiliar with the music and conducted away with his head buried in the score, failing to give the chorus that help with which a man like Henry Wood would probably have coaxed them through more successfully.

Altogether there was such a chapter of accidents that the first performance proved a disaster which might well have laid low the 'Dream of Gerontius' for many years had not English musicians and music-lovers been startled to hear that the august Richard Strauss (who had been vastly impressed by the work in Julius Buth's German version at Dusseldorf in 1902) had authoritatively proposed a toast to the success and welfare of the first English progressive musician, *Meister* Elgar. Intrigued by such an unexpected tribute from a German musician of Strauss' standing, audiences in this country determined to hear 'Gerontius' again, and it was performed at the 'Three Choirs' Festival in Worcester on September 11th, 1902, in Sheffield a month later, and so on with happier results, so that it did eventually earn the place in our esteem that it has always merited.

But even with the 'Dream of Gerontius' securely in the repertory and sure of a reasonable standard of performance, it has always been the victim of one kind of misunderstanding or another. Even A. J. Jaeger (the 'Nimrod' of the 'Enigma Variations'), an ardent Elgarian and one who was on the closest terms with Elgar, wrote an analysis of the score in September 1900, published as a part of the book of words by Novello, which frequently seems to confuse the issue. In particular, Jaeger's system of labelling themes, such as 'Omnipresence', 'Christ' and so on in the Wagnerian *leitmotiv* style—while it is quite useful for the purposes of analysis—seems to have led to an unnecessary bewilderment. It has the weighty authority of Jaeger's close association with the composer, but it is very difficult to believe that Elgar had such ideas in mind as he was working, or that he cared very much for such detailed systems, literary rather than musical; and, indeed, such a notion is quite out of character. The

purely musical justification for the use of certain themes throughout the score is always crystal-clear, but one has to strain meanings very far if one is always to be able to account intellectually for the use of a particular theme at a particular moment; and to go along murmuring 'Ah—Fear', or 'Sense of Pain' is one more way of not seeing the wood for the trees, and not the best way of approaching the music.

Technical confusion is not so common as the misunderstanding of the nature of the work. Many people who are antipathetic to the Church have objected to the 'Dream of Gerontius' because of its subject. Mr Cecil Gray, a critic chiefly conspicuous for the facility of his expression, has admirably demonstrated this attitude. In his 'Survey of Contemporary Music', Mr Gray says, 'The air is too heavy with the odour of clerical sanctity and the faint and sickly aroma of stale incense, and the little light there is filters dimly through stained-glass windows. After a time one begins to long for a breath of fresh air or a glimpse of sunshine. With all its spirituality and undoubted sincerity the atmosphere is sanctimonious rather than saintly, pious rather than fervid. . . . Gerontius is essentially the counterpart of the Oxford Movement.' To object to the work solely on these grounds is illogical, though perhaps not unnatural. The problem of the appreciation of music is that of being able to share, or at least to imagine oneself as sharing, an experience or an emotion in its organised expression: thus it is not the dogma involved which is relevant to us here, but Elgar's response to the dogma. If the music *is* sanctimonious its sincerity is, at the least, very strongly suspect. Elgar's work is an imaginative realisation of certain Catholic truths—but a realisation which far transcends the mere intellectual statement of them. It is perhaps true that 'the average present-day reader looks upon the poem either as a mainly incomprehensible exposition of dogma or else as a jesuitical attempt to make him swallow a theological pill hidden in the jam of a human story' (Basil Maine), but we are not now concerned simply with the dogma but with viewing the poem as it were through the eyes of Elgar's faith: it is the quality of his reaction to the poem and his ability in expressing this experience that are now relevant to us. Many people find the basic spiritual beliefs of Wagner or Delius, for example, unpalatable in their different ways, but this does not debar them from a whole-hearted enjoyment of their music. One does not condemn

a picture because it happens to portray an uncongenial subject, nor need one be dead to the art of the pagan Greeks because one is not a pagan Greek, nor, as Mr Maine has pointed out, does one have to be a trade-unionist to enjoy the 'Mastersingers'. What one does demand is that neither the inspiration nor the execution shall be mediocre.

On the other hand, while some critics have exposed the fallacy which has led many sensitive people to reject 'Gerontius' more than most works, they have often over-stated their case and gone far towards creating a misunderstanding in the opposite direction. Having been told to reject 'Gerontius' as a piece of low and gloomy Catholic propaganda, we are now told that all that is of no consequence and that only the music matters. This attitude, expressive of contemporary apathy, is that the subject of the 'Dream of Gerontius' need not concern us at all except as a point of departure, or as a mere skeleton to be clothed in fine music. One writer (J. Porte) puts it thus: 'There are many parts of the libretto which seem fanatical to us; for instance, we believe in the existence of "Purgatory" as much as we do in Jack's Beanstalk or Alice's Wonderland, but the whole is vivid and imaginative, Elgar's music fitting in exactly with the words.' Some more cautious critics would perhaps be slower to assume such a widespread acceptance of their personal views, particularly when a belief in Purgatory is one of the fundamental tenets of the world's largest Christian body; and one may also suspect some confusion in the writer's mind between a truth and the symbols by which it is expressed.

'. . . thou art wrapped and swathed around in dreams,  
 Dreams that are true, yet enigmatical;  
 For the belongings of thy present state  
 Save through symbols come not home to thee.'

But it seems that the bulk of Porte's argument is either that Elgar must be a fanatic for believing what 'we' do not believe (in which case the fact that his music fits in exactly with the words must be understood as a measure of condemnation in view of the writer's earlier strictures upon the poem), or that he was insincere, or that the words are of no intrinsic importance to the oratorio except as a kind of tailor's dummy.

Such views as these are mistaken, for they ignore the extraordinary cohesion between the words and the music: one cannot

sift away the poem and leave the music. We know that Elgar studied the libretto for some ten years, and 'Gerontius' was the finely-wrought expression of deep-rooted and sincere beliefs. It is essentially a Catholic work, an act of faith and of worship, far removed from the dogmatic bickerings of the Oxford Movement. Much aesthetic satisfaction may be gained by a sensitive non-believer from the beautiful performance of the Church's liturgy, and it is obvious that the appeal of the 'Dream of Gerontius'—since it uses a more universal and generally comprehensible medium—will be greater and more wide-spread: but for the fullest and richest experience of either one must have had some glimpse not only of the transcendental faith of 'Angels and Archangels, Thrones and Dominations, Princedoms and Powers, Cherubim and Seraphim, Patriarchs and Prophets, Apostles and Evangelists, Martyrs and Confessors, holy Monks and Hermits, holy Virgins and all Saints of God', but also of the fearful path along which we must all, one day, follow Gerontius.

### THE FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN

As part of the Catholic contribution to the Festival of Britain, a dramatised performance of Newman's *Dream of Gerontius* will be given at the Scala Theatre from September 10th to 15th. The production is under the direction of Mr Alan Nye, and Mr Robert Speaight and Mr Raf de la Torre will be taking part. Special Music is being composed by the choirmaster of Farm Street, Mr L. Lalous.

From May 13th to 20th there will be a Festival of music in Westminster Cathedral under the direction of Mr George Malcolm. The composers represented include Byrd, Tallis, Taverner and Elgar, as well as contemporary English Catholic musicians.