

# Elder and Elgar

*Alex Hodgkinson savours a favourite recording of Newman's epic The Dream of Gerontius*

## ON THE RECORD

With his assertive gaze, aristocratic bearing and lavish moustache, photographs of Sir Edward Elgar give the impression of the archetypal English establishment figure. In fact, Elgar was something of an outsider: a Catholic from a humble background.

Born into a devout family in 1857, the talented young Edward deputised for his shopkeeper father as organist of St George's Church in Worcester, then run by the Jesuits. Throughout his life, however, Elgar also held a close association with the city's Anglican cathedral, and his compositions have dominated the programmes of the Three Choirs Festival since the beginning of the 20th century. The festival returns to Worcester this summer (27 July to 3 August), culminating in a performance of Elgar's magnificent 1906 oratorio, *The Kingdom*.

In 1899, at the age of 42, Elgar achieved the recognition he had longed for after the premiere of his *Enigma Variations*. Next came one of the most important Catholic works of art of the 20th century: a setting of parts of St John Henry Newman's epic *The Dream of Gerontius*.

The poem, written in 1865, explores the physical and emotional journey from death to Judgement and Purgatory. Those familiar with the hymn "Praise to the Holiest in the Height" will recognise several verses of the text. Elgar responded with music of great drama, sensitivity and profundity.

The premiere was a smorgasbord of chaos, and in the years immediately afterwards, Anglican clerics either vetoed it entirely or insisted performances be de-Catholicised (though I'm really not sure how one would even begin). Despite this unpropitious start, it soon became, and remains, among the best-loved large-scale choral works of all time, at least in the UK.

One of my favourite recordings – and there are many superb accounts to choose from – is

that of the Hallé Orchestra, Chorus and Youth Choir in 2008, conducted by Sir Mark Elder, who has just retired after 24 years at the orchestra's helm.

Elder's interpretation is dramatic but not melodramatic, and his tempi are faithful to the score. The orchestral playing is deeply passionate, yet nothing gets lost in the heat. Every note is cherished, and the distinct lines and colours shine through with startling clarity. Kudos, too, to the recording engineers.

Both dynamic extremes of the chorus are thrilling. Alice Coote (the Angel) proves a laudable successor to Dame Janet Baker (who sang on two seminal recordings in the 20th century) and Sir Bryn Terfel (the Priest) brings all the gravitas you could wish for.

In the title role, the American Paul Groves's singing is entirely engaging and, when appropriate, beautiful. This is a voice in its prime – so much so that the opening sounds almost a little too full-bodied for a deathbed scene.



**'Rescue him!' cry his friends as the pulse gradually slows. 'Novissima hora est,' Gerontius sings. This is a golden moment: the stillness, the gentle chromaticism, the subtle harmonic knots**

The orchestral Prelude (disc 1, track 1) begins with a hushed, sombre, minor melody in unison (the "Judgement" theme) and goes on to give a synopsis of the musical material heard throughout the piece. Each motif represents a facet of the story: fear, prayer, sleep, despair and so on.

We meet the fading protagonist as he sings "Jesu, Maria, I am near to death, and thou art calling me" (track 2). The flexible lyricism – a novel style of vocal writing, somewhere between recitative and song – easily allows the abrupt changes of mood as Gerontius flits between terror, hope, pleading and serene acceptance.

"Rescue him!" cry his friends as the pulse gradually slows. "Novissima hora est," Gerontius sings, "it is the final hour" (track 6). This is a golden moment: the stillness, the gentle chromaticism, the subtle harmonic knots. His melody is assumed by the violins, speaking as if from the other side; he receives the Priest's benediction and is duly sent forth (track 7).

In Part 2, Gerontius (now referred to as the Soul) awakens revitalised and serene – he meets an angel singing "Alleluia" (disc 2, track 3). Their exchange is affirmative – but evil lurks not far away as a hubbub of demons jeer at the man's life and faith. Guided through the diabolical circus by the Angel, the pair enter the House of Judgement as the double choir builds to one of the most thrilling climaxes in choral music (track 10). Elgar referred to this moment as "the great blaze". Just when you think the massed voices are giving all they've got, they summon yet more. It is utterly exhilarating.

After the Angel's final, ecstatic "Alleluia", there is a tremendous crescendo and an explosion of light: a sonic burst from another world as, for one moment, Gerontius comes face to face with God (track 13). The overwhelmed Soul cries for the Angel to "take me away", and we hear the *Novissima* music once more.

Gently, the Angel lowers Gerontius into the lake of Purgatory (track 14) with tenderness and love, accompanied by other souls singing in prayer; the work concludes in heavenly tranquillity as distant angels repeat "Praise to the holiest". The Soul is at rest, safe in the promise of "everlasting day". Elgar inscribed the final page of the score with words of John Ruskin: "This is the best of me." CH

*Alex Hodgkinson is Director of Music at St Theresa's Church, Trumbull, Connecticut*