

Salisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 18TH MARCH 2021

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope the newsletter continues to find you well.

Before the Dream



My starting point for this week's ramblings is the outstanding oratorio The Dream of Gerontius by **Edward Elgar (1857 - 1934)**. I could very easily write a lot about this work, so keeping it concise is a particular challenge for this edition of the newsletter!

A commission for the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival in 1900 set Elgar to work on *The Dream of Gerontius*, a choral work based on a poem by the English poet, priest and theologian **John Henry Newman (1801 - 1890)**. The Birmingham Triennial Musical Festival, founded in 1784, was the longest-running classical music festival of its kind. It last took place in 1912. Inspired by the subject matter, Elgar composed the oratorio at such a speed that it was ready by the autumn. The work was premiered on 3rd October 1900 but was very under-rehearsed and the performance came close to being a disaster. The experience left Elgar profoundly depressed and he was quoted as saying: *"I always said God was against art and I still believe it"*.



It took the German conductor and pianist **Julius Buths (1851 - 1920)** to demonstrate the greatness of *Gerontius*. Buths translated the libretto and conducted an outstanding performance in Düsseldorf on 19th December 1901 at which Elgar and his wife Alice were present.

On 19th May 1902, there was a further performance in Düsseldorf. The English conductor **Sir Henry Wood (1869 - 1944)**, who we met in last week's newsletter, was present at this performance and later wrote: *"Elgar was recalled 20 times after the first part. I have never seen an audience so excited nor a composer so spontaneously acclaimed"*. The German composer, conductor, pianist, and violinist **Richard**



Strauss (1864 - 1949) who by the beginning of the 20th century was Germany's most acclaimed composer, proposed a toast to Elgar at a dinner the following night: *"To the welfare and success of the first English progressive, Meister Edward Elgar, and of the young progressive school of English composers"*.

In Part One, *Gerontius* is on his death bed with a priest and friends, contemplating what lies beyond life. In Part Two, *Gerontius* is in a dream state as his soul slips away. His soul is pleaded for and he has a flashing sight of God before he is taken to his trial in Purgatory.

There are a number of recordings that are worthy of attention! I've decided to narrow it down to two. Here is a recording conducted by **David Hill** with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Waynflete Singers and an excellent line-up of soloists, including William Kendall (a lay clerk in Winchester Cathedral choir) in the title role: [Gerontius \(David Hill\)](#). I also recommend this recording, mainly because I like to follow the score! [Gerontius with score](#)



If you don't know the Dream of Gerontius, do have a listen... and do have a listen a few times, it's one of those pieces that grows on you. If you do know this piece, I hope this gives you an excuse to listen again! **This is my number three of my favourite choral works!** Elgar gave his own view of the oratorio at the end of the manuscript score by writing: *"This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved and hated, like another: my life was as the vapour and is not; but this I saw and knew; this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory"*.



From a well-known choral work to two rarities, which pre-date the Dream of Gerontius. During 1895 Edward Elgar, with the Three Choirs Festival at Worcester in 1896 in mind, asked an Anglican clergyman, the Rev. **Edward Capel Cure (1828 - 1890)**, for a libretto on a biblical subject. He replied with three suggestions, of which he thought the best was the story of Christ healing the blind man: *"Call it Lux Christi... it is a perfect story, descriptive and dramatic - would almost arrange itself for musical treatment"*. Elgar agreed and the finished libretto reached him in August 1895. The vocal score of the oratorio was completed early in April 1896 and Novello agreed to publish it. They had asked for the oratorio to be kept under an hour in length and queried the Latin title lest an Anglican cathedral festival might detect Roman Catholic bias. Elgar suggested *The Light that Shineth*, but readily accepted Novello's suggestion of [The Light of Life](#).



The first performance took place on 8th September 1896 in Worcester Cathedral. The tenor soloist was **Edward Lloyd (1845 - 1927)**, who was later to be the first Gerontius. The Light of Life was revised and repeated at the Three Choirs Festival three years later. The Light of Life is the prelude to the uncompleted trilogy of New Testament oratorios, which occupied Elgar in the first six years of the twentieth century. Listen out in particular for the fluency of the writing for solo tenor in The Light of Life, which foreshadows the tenor role in Gerontius. Here is a very good performance with soloists Margaret Marshall, Helen Watts, Robin Leggate and John Shirley-Quirk, the Liverpool Philharmonic Choir and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, all conducted by **Sir Charles Groves (1915 - 1992)**: [Light of Life](#)



The other Elgar rarity is the cantata [The Black Knight](#) which is based on "The Ballad of the Black Knight" by **Johann Ludwig Uhland (1787 - 1862)**, the Black Knight being a sinister character who rides into the lists during the feast of Pentecost and destroys the girl who dances with him and the young people who drink with him (jolly plot isn't it?). The first performance took place in the Public Hall, Worcester on 18th April 1893. Here is a performance of the work by the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by **Richard Hickox (1948 - 2008)**: [The Black Knight](#)



That's all for this week folks, I hope you're still enjoying (reading) the newsletters.

Stay safe and keep singing!

Graham