

The Apostles, op 49

An oratorio for soprano, contralto, tenor and three bass soloists, full choir and orchestra, based on biblical texts selected and arranged by Elgar. The oratorio is in two parts and is invariably performed with an interval between parts 1 and 2.

Approximate Length: Part 1 : 70 minutes; Part 2 : 50 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 14 October 1903

Venue: Birmingham Triennial Festival

Conductor: the composer

Commissioned by: Birmingham Festival Committee

Dedicated to: A M D G (Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam)

The Apostles followed a complex gestation. Elgar had planned a work covering some of the same ground for the 1900 Birmingham festival but illness delayed progress. Late in 1899, he decided instead to set Cardinal Newman's poem *The Dream of Gerontius* for the festival. The idea for a work based on the lives of the Apostles stayed with him, however, and, when approached for a work for the 1903 festival, he returned to the subject. He originally planned a single oratorio in three parts covering the calling of the Apostles, Jesus' betrayal by Judas, Peter's denial, the resurrection, the descent of the holy spirit and the establishment of the Christian church in Jerusalem. But illness again delayed him and he subsequently decided to curtail *The Apostles* at the resurrection, leaving the remainder, already largely composed, to become *The Kingdom*. (Later, he planned a third oratorio, provisionally called *The Last Judgement*, to follow *The Kingdom* but never completed it.)

The Apostles is nevertheless magnificent in scale, containing many powerful and innovative musical ideas. It shares a number of themes with *The Light of Life*, perhaps confirmation that this was indeed the culmination of the earlier work Elgar had planned for the 1900 festival. The work also makes extensive use of leitmotifs - Jaeger identified 92 of them - drawing inevitable comparisons with Wagner. This, the work's length, the contemplative mood of sections of the work, the lesser dramatic cohesion of the libretto and the financial burden of six soloists have combined to prevent the work from gaining the status of *The Dream of Gerontius*.

But the work deserves greater recognition. A number of critics consider the work to contain finer music than *Gerontius*, regarding *The Apostles* as the pinnacle of Elgar's musical achievements. The dramatic use of the shofar (an ancient Jewish ritual trumpet) and the beauty of the mystic chorus are just two highlights of the work. But, above all, few can fail to be moved by the final ten minutes of the work, covering the resurrection, which must surely be one of the most moving finales in the whole of the classical repertoire. Not to be missed.

