

The Dream of Gerontius. Composition of the Work

Life after Death

How Elgar came to write the Work

It was in the Summer of 1898 that Elgar was first asked if he would write a major new work for the 1900 Birmingham Triennial Festival. Elgar accepted, but remained pre-occupied for much of 1899 with other, more pressing matters. During the first months of 1899, he was still hard at work on the Enigma Variations. Then, on 21 March, the Elgars moved from Forli to a far more imposing detached property which Elgar promptly named Craeg Lea, situated overlooking the Wells Road some way south of the town centre. Following the first, successful performance of the Variations on 19 June 1899, his friend, August Jaeger, feeling the original ending to be somewhat perfunctory, persuaded Elgar to compose the extended ending with which we are familiar today. Elgar worked on the new ending during the Summer and the revised work was first performed on 13 September 1899 at that year's Three Choirs Festival, held in Worcester. During the same period, from 11 July until 18 August, he also composed *Sea Pictures*, his setting for contralto and orchestra of five poems with a maritime theme. The work received its première on 5 October at that year's Norwich Festival, with Clara Butt singing. It is therefore not surprising that Elgar appears to have given little further thought to the work for Birmingham until the Autumn of 1899.

Elgar had owned a copy of Newman's poem since at least 1885; he had been given a further copy as a present on his marriage to Alice in May 1889. By his own admission, Elgar had been considering setting Newman's poem for at least eight years, and Alice's diary for September 1899 records that, in the margins of a Three Choirs concert, 'E. walked with Father Bellasis', a priest from the Birmingham Oratory who had known Newman personally. But the implication that Elgar was at this point considering setting Newman's poem for the Birmingham festival is not borne out by subsequent events.

In November 1899, Elgar sent Jaeger his first sketches for a new work which eventually became *The Apostles*. But by early January 1900, Elgar was coming to realise that he had left himself insufficient time to complete this work. On 12 January, Elgar instead began to adapt his poem to provide a more satisfactory libretto. Work now progressed rapidly : on 2 March, he sent Jaeger the first forty-four pages of the score; and the remainder of Part I followed on 20 March.

Like his contemporaries Sibelius and Mahler, Elgar drew much inspiration from the countryside. In May 1898, while still living at Forli, the Elgars acquired the use of Birchwood, a cottage near Storridge on the border of Worcestershire and Herefordshire. Despite its comparative proximity to Malvern, the atmosphere was a world apart. It was to Birchwood that Elgar fled to find the peace, quiet and inspiration he needed to complete *Gerontius* against the tight deadlines he now faced. He used a south-facing room on the first floor at the front of the property as his study, with views along the length of the Malvern Hills towards British Camp. And when he failed to find the stimulus he sought from the view from

his study window, he would take to the fields and lanes around Birchwood. The entry in Alice's diary for 2 May is of particular interest. It reads :

"E. for walk from Bransford to Powyke [sic]. Writing lovely part."

With the necessary preconditions in place, Elgar converted fragmentary ideas into a complex and fully worked out vocal score with surprising rapidity. As has already been noted, he completed Part I in a two-month period between January and March 1900. Part II occupied a similar timespan despite the distraction of proofs of Part I requiring correction which began to arrive at Craeg Lea in early April. By late May, the vocal score was complete apart from the final "great chorus" ('Praise to the Holiest'). A concentrated burst of heightened compositional activity led to completion on 6 June.

At this stage, of course, Elgar still had to orchestrate the work, and the priority was to provide the choir with copies of the vocal score with which to start rehearsing the work. But the next month was largely taken up with a protracted and detailed correspondence between Elgar and Jaeger discussing the finer points of the work as Elgar corrected and returned to Novello the remaining proofs.

The dialogue between Elgar and Jaeger consumed valuable time and on one passage in particular - where the Soul, having briefly glimpsed the Almighty, sings "Take me away ..." - they could not agree. The last proofs were not returned to Novello until 11 July and it was not until 17 July that Elgar made clear to Jaeger that further debate was futile. Copies of the vocal parts began to appear on 21 July and were in the hands of the choir by early August. Much still remained to be done, however, including the bulk of the orchestration. This Elgar completed on 3 August, but correction of the full score continued throughout the following month and there were still the orchestral parts to write out.

At last, all was complete. Elgar knew that he had created a work of outstanding merit. On completing the full score, he added to it the now famous quotation from John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* : 'This is the best of me...' Time was now short, although not impossibly so. But, Elgar and Jaeger apart, few could at this point have appreciated the work's complexity. To turn a difficult situation into an impending disaster, the choirmaster, Charles Swinnerton Heap, who was already familiar with Elgar's style and had prepared the choir for a successful première of *King Olaf* some four years earlier, died unexpectedly in June 1900.

The consequences of this and the subsequent early history of the work are well known. An under-rehearsed and somewhat chaotic première, slammed by the majority of the critics present, cast doubts on the work's survival. But fortunately there were those in the audience who could see beyond the choir's failings and recognise a work of great merit. Not least among these was Julius Butts Director of the North Rhein Festival, who arranged widely acclaimed performances in Düsseldorf in 1901 and again in 1902 which set *Gerontius* on the road to the position it holds today.

It is tantalising to ponder from this distance what might have become of *Gerontius* without Jaeger. The choir would have received their vocal scores somewhat earlier and, with more

time for rehearsal, may have given a more creditable performance at the Birmingham première. A more favourable critical reception might not have cast initial doubts over the work's survival. But the work would undoubtedly have been that little bit poorer. If so, would it still have grown in popularity and critical acclaim to achieve the position of respect it commands today?