

# The Dream of Gerontius. The Recorded Legacy.

A Comparative Review by Walter Essex

## SECTION 1 - Introduction

I remember vividly my first encounter with *The Dream of Gerontius*. It was the summer of 1963. I used to visit my local record library in Coventry every week, invariably taking home a diet of Gilbert and Sullivan, Tchaikovsky and certain Verdi operas. On the occasion in question, I decided to be adventurous and took home Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* (all six discs of it!) and *The Dream of Gerontius*. The Wagner I found very boring (a judgment long since thoroughly revised!), but that may have been because I was so completely bowled over by what I heard of the Elgar. I remember it was Sargent's 1955 recording that I had taken home, the only one available at the time, and whilst my rapture at this performance has been somewhat modified over the years, it remains a very special item in my current collection for what it did both to me and for me at that time.

With anything that remains a focal point for devotion, one is always in danger of losing a sense of objectivity. With regard to *Gerontius* I admit that I quite fail to be objective about it; it is too deep-rooted in my spirit for that. However, with recordings I find that I can bring a level of objectivity to the work, but inevitably personal taste plays a considerable part and I do not necessarily expect everyone to agree with my views.

In greeting the most recent recording of *Gerontius* (Handley), the Society Chairman wrote of "a work which has now been recorded more times than Elgarians have any right to expect". With eleven different versions (not all currently available) as well as the excerpts conducted by Elgar himself, one can only agree. Among these recordings there are many fine performances : from soloists, choirs, orchestras, and conductors; but these "fine performances" do not always coincide within the same recording. To my mind, the *Gerontius* recording with the perfect synthesis of forces has yet to be made, and in this I perhaps strive for an improbable perfection.

I do accept that we all hear voices differently, and with the soloists, at least, there can be wide divergences of opinion. Within my own immediate Elgarian circle, several people will each come up with a different *Gerontius* recording from which they could not be parted, or which they would have to take with them to that mythical "desert island". For myself, I could not be parted from *any* of them; each performance has at least one element I could not be without.

## SECTION 2 - The Prelude

In all the recordings of *Gerontius*, the playing of the Prelude gives notice of the style of performance which is to follow, which is not to suggest that the Prelude is detached from the rest of the work: it is a vital ingredient of the whole. At the very opening, as

with *Parsifal*, the listener immediately enters a unique sound world, and I look for the way a conductor recreates this "sound world" in terms of orchestral textures, dynamics and tempi. In both of his recordings, Sargent indicates that it is the dramatic rather than the spiritual nature of the work which will predominate. There are some oddly perfunctory sections in both performances (a criticism that can be levelled at Sargent's interpretation overall, particularly that of 1955). In 1945 the 'Go forth' theme moves briskly, yet retains much warmth. By 1955 this same section lacks impetus; there is no forward flow, and the tempi throughout the Prelude are pulled about rather too roughly. Britten, as might be expected from an opera composer, unfolds the full drama of the work in a quite thrilling performance of the Prelude. He takes a few liberties with the score, not only here but throughout, but there is an unerring "rightness" about it when he does, given his intense interpretation. An example is at eight bars after fig 9 and again at fig 10 where Elgar indicates a total silence on the bar line - a moment's pause to gather strength. Britten allows the timpani roll to continue right across the bar line, thus momentarily assuming the spotlight. Unauthentic it may be, but it is undeniably spine-tingling. Gibson is disappointing, many of the contrasts in both tempi and dynamics going for nothing.

Handley is very attentive to the dynamic shading, without giving any hint of calculation. His transition into the 'Go forth' theme at fig 12 is probably the smoothest of all, and he conjures up a real shiver down the spine just before fig 17 with the 'fp' on woodwind and tam-tam as it introduces the 'Sleep' theme.

In both of his recordings, Barbirolli establishes his dramatic viewpoint in the Prelude. He makes the most of every contrast and maintains a forward impulse, avoiding all the temptations to linger. The "live" 1957 Rome performance perhaps catches him in more inspired mood than in 1964, although the Symphony Orchestra of Rome Radio seems unhappy at times, with some raw string tone at the great climaxes. Both Rattle and Hickox blend the dramatic and spiritual in an almost ideal way. The very opening of the Prelude with Rattle and the CBSO is the most sheerly beautiful of all. When I first heard this performance, I was reminded immediately of the opening to *Parsifal*. Both openings, in their transparency and colouring, establish the spiritual "feel" of what is to follow. With Rattle the opening 'pp' and the 'ppp' at fig 2 really are just that. However, given the very wide dynamic range accorded to this recording, the great climaxes make for uncomfortable domestic listening when the volume control is adjusted to be able to acknowledge the very quietest moments.

Boult is very much in a dimension of his own. Certainly there is drama in his Prelude, but it is the spiritual resonances which impinge on one's consciousness. Even the magnificent 'Go forth' theme, for once, is not brazen, but manages to convey a measure of gentleness and restraint - a real nobility of spirit. Throughout, Boult is not one to linger and he keeps up the forward momentum of the piece...which is more than can be said for Svetlanov! His recording, on the Russian Melodiya label, is an oddity amongst all these recordings. It was a performance recorded live in Moscow in April 1983 with British soloists and choir, and Russian orchestra. Svetlanov's reading of the Prelude is idiosyncratic, to say the least. Both opening and ending are very slow; there is little sensitivity to the changing tempi, creating an overall blandness. The somewhat bronchially afflicted audience mars some of the quieter moments.

Elgar's audience at the Royal Albert Hall in February 1927 was similarly afflicted - some should clearly have been at home in bed! - and Elgar himself proclaimed the test pressings of the recording "a sad disaster". However, thanks to the tenacity of Jerrold Northrop Moore, we have this recording of the Prelude. Inevitably there is something special about Elgar's own recording. Is the intensity I feel when listening to this account real or imagined? Am I simply in awe of the presence of the composer himself? Again, objectivity fails to register as one submits to the overwhelming majesty of the performance.

And so, our conductors have laid down their credentials and little that follows should take the listener by surprise. None of them is let down by his orchestra. Even Barbirolli's Rome orchestra has some fine moments; in any case with the actual recording quality rather unfocused, it would be unfair to make a negative judgment. However, if I were to choose amongst the orchestras for sheer brilliance, Rattle's CBSO and Handley's RLPO really do stand out for the body of string tone, unanimity of woodwind blending, and all sections proving a virtuosic command of the score. The score itself is incredibly detailed in both dynamics and tempi; again and again both Rattle and Handley prove the composer's eloquence in their adherence to these markings, although, paradoxically, neither is slavish in his approach.

### **SECTION 3 - The Choir(s)**

*Gerontius* makes tremendous demands on the choir(s) and there is not one choir amongst these recordings which does not rise to the challenge, even if full satisfaction is not always achieved. The two big set pieces - the 'Demons' Chorus' and 'Praise to the Holiest' may be the bench-marks by which any choir is judged in this work, but there is much else in the score which taxes their full resources.

Both of Sargent's recordings use the Huddersfield Choral Society. In 1945 the choir displays great depth of tone, with altos and tenors particularly striking. The latter are quite superb in the 'Demons' Chorus', and this section shows the power and vitality of the whole choir. Sargent's beautifully-shaped account of 'Praise to the Holiest' raises the hairs on the back of the neck. By 1955 the HCS has lost some of its bloom, the tone often sounding pinched. In the 'Go forth' section at the end of Part I, the choir sounds stodgy and there is some suspect soprano intonation. Even 'Praise to the Holiest' fails to lift off. The HCS reappear, in combination with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir, under Vernon Handley, and very fine they are. The 'Demons' Chorus' is a real 'tour de force'. It is sung "straight", ie. no leering characterisation, but is rhythmically taut and exciting. Throughout, the tone is full-bodied and the semi-chorus sopranos are truly ethereal. Only in the closing pages of 'Praise to the Holiest' is there a slight feeling of "running out of steam".

Barbirolli (1964) certainly presses his combined choirs to play up the drama of the 'Demons' Chorus'. The sneering and leering are vividly characterised, but at the expense both of tone - very ragged at climaxes - and rhythmic precision. Elsewhere, the choirs acquit themselves well and satisfy this listener at least. Barbirolli's Rome choir (1957) sometimes has difficulty with the English vowel sounds, but otherwise diction is the least troublesome aspect. There is a forthright honesty about much of the singing, and they master Barbirolli's variations in

tempi in 'Praise to the Holiest' magnificently, but ultimately it is the unyielding tone of the choir that wearies the ear. The sopranos, particularly, lack the essential purity of sound.

Under Britten, the London Symphony Chorus sounds undernourished at the great climaxes, although in the quieter moments there are some ravishing sounds; for example, 'Be merciful, be gracious' (fig 35), where Britten provides a tempo steadier than many to great effect. Where Britten really scores is in his use of the choir of King's College Cambridge for the semi-chorus. The section in Part II which leads up to the main statement of 'Praise to the Holiest' (figs 60-68) is stunning, the choral sound being truly of another world. Britten also manages in this section to convey the necessary forward momentum of Gerontius's soul moving "with extremest speed" to its judgment.

Gibson's SNO Chorus offers good, forthright singing, but little subtlety. Occasionally the sopranos are edgy at the top of the range, and the tenors ragged. Gibson's sometimes hard-pressed speeds may be responsible for some lack of unanimity of tone. There is a great warmth of tone in Boult's combined London Philharmonic Choir and John Alldis Choir. This registers immediately in the 'Kyrie' (fig 29) and 'Holy Mary, pray for him' (fig 30) sections. The choirs sound particularly beautiful in the double chorus section at the end of Part I (fig 75): 'Go forth on thy course'. The 'pp' and 'ppp' markings are observed without any loss of intonation and the soprano top B flat is etched in ethereally. The 'Demons' Chorus' is very impressive both in its choral sound and in the power of the orchestra, although ultimately real drama is lacking. 'Praise to the Holiest' does not move along as one might wish, Boult's tempi not entirely in keeping with the score, but there is an undoubted grandeur in the reading. The choirs respond with some glorious singing and achieve a real sense of repose at the section beginning 'O gen'rous love' (two bars after fig 80).

The London Symphony Chorus's contribution to the Svetlanov recording is uneven, but given the conductor's eccentric tempi this may not be surprising. The 'Kyrie' and the ensuing 'Holy Mary, pray for him' sound very stodgy. 'Be merciful', at a very fast speed, is very edgy with almost an air of impatience about it - quite wrong for the feeling behind the words! However, the 'Demons' Chorus', again very fast, has a real thrill about it. Part way into 'Praise to the Holiest' I closed my score and simply listened. I stopped worrying about the tempi; the choir, singing superbly, simply followed Svetlanov and it seemed all of a piece; it felt right! A stunning account. Recording the work in the studio with Hickox some five years later, the LSC seem much happier and their singing is uniformly excellent throughout. There are moments when I feel it is not quite big enough in sound to encompass the big climaxes, but there is energy and a sense of drama when needed, and no thinning out of tone in the quieter passages.

If I leave Rattle's CBSO choir until last, it is because I feel that, in conjunction with its conductor, it approaches the ideal. It does not sound as large a body of singers as in other recordings, but there is a richness of tone throughout the dynamic range. (It also sounds a youthful choir!) If I were to choose just one example to display the merits of this choir and conductor, I would choose the section 'Be merciful be gracious' (fig 35). At the beginning the tenors sing "Be merciful" (mf), joined by the altos in the same register on "Be gracious" (pp). At fig 38 it is the basses (mf), joined by the tenors (p), who have these phrases. The seamless 'legato' and precise observance of the dynamics make these ecstatic moments. On

the words "Lord, deliver him" there is a unanimous rhythmic precision which I find matched only by Boult. Boult's choirs are also matched by Rattle's at fig 75 ('Go forth on thy course') at the end of Part I. The clarity of texture and secure intonation, in a section which can too often sound pinched and undernourished, almost takes one's breath away. This choir's precision is used to great effect in the 'Demons' Chorus' where, incidentally, there is a real difference between the slurred "Ha! ha!"s and those marked 'staccato' (sfz). 'Praise to the Holiest' provides a sumptuous piece of choral singing. Rattle's tempi towards the end might not accord exactly with the score, but the ending brings an exhilaration matched only by Sargent (1945) and - yes! - Elgar himself. If there is a drawback with the CBSO Chorus, it is in the rather distant recording afforded it by EMI. I feel this is a miscalculation, but it cannot diminish my sheer joy in listening to this choir.

#### SECTION 4 - Gerontius

For many people, I am sure, the casting of the principal singers is a major factor in any recording of *Gerontius*. With regard to Gerontius himself, what sort of voice does one expect? In Part I he is a man near to death, burdened by the weariness of pain. This must be conveyed by any interpreter, as well as the fear and dread; and yet he must rise to the heroic challenge of 'Sanctus fortis' in Part I and 'Take me away' in Part II. Inevitably it is a difficult part to bring off in all its facets.

There is certainly a richness of interpreters in recorded performances. However, before examining the complete recordings, I must go back to Elgar's own recorded extracts. There is too little of Stuart Wilson on the Royal Albert Hall account to make any real judgment, although the tone, in what we do hear, has a heroic ring to it. There is a little more of Tudor Davies in the Hereford extracts (and how tantalisingly brief they are!) Here we have a wealth of open, Italianate tone and operatic full-bloodedness which would seem to have the composer's blessing. Elgar himself said that he saw Gerontius as "a man like us, a sinner, a repentant one of course, but still no end of a worldly man in his life"; his music, therefore, was no "church tunes and rubbish, but a good, healthy, full-blooded romantic, remembered worldliness". That would seem to point to the Tudor Davies approach, and I have to admit that it is the approach I personally prefer. In the complete recordings only two interpreters measure up to this (Arthur Davies and Jon Vickers); which is not to say that the others are not equally valid.

Only one interpretation would I willingly discard; regretfully it is that by Robert Tear. I say "regretfully" for Tear is an artist I much admire, but on his recorded showing at least, he is not a Gerontius. His singing is forthright and honest but no more. The varied dynamics go for little; more often than not his singing is unrelentingly loud. His opening in Part I is effortful (perhaps not inappropriately so!) 'Sanctus fortis' begins 'ff' rather than the marked 'mf' and so leaves no room for expansion. (Few of the tenors actually observe this; those who do show that Elgar really knew what he was about!) However, Tear is not helped in this section by Gibson's very fast tempo which robs the piece of any dignity. In much of the colloquy with the Angel in Part II Tear is unbearably hectoring. No, this is not a performance to be comfortable with.

Richard Lewis has assumed the part twice on these recordings, with Sargent in 1955 and with Barbirolli in 1964. The later recording displays a certain loss of bloom on the voice in the intervening years, and a beat in the upper register has developed. However in both recordings his is a riveting interpretation. At the opening he is utterly believable as a man on his deathbed, employing a "drained" tone which, however, opens up magnificently when required. Particularly in the later recording, there is real exhaustion expressed in the words "I can no more" (two bars after fig 57), yet there is no holding back from the high B flat in the phrase "in thine own agony" (two bars before fig 63), thrillingly delivered. The natural speech rhythms in the opening section of Part II are a joy. "Take me away" finds Lewis stretched in both recordings, with some lumpy phrasing, but overall his performances are heartfelt and truly cherishable.

Peter Pears (with Britten) is completely credible in his characterisation. In Part I one can really empathise with the anguish of Gerontius, and his verbal articulation in his exchanges with the Angel in Part II is mercurial. However, although his is a voice I much admire, it is not one I can really love. It is neither lyrical (at this stage in his career) nor heroic, and it is the latter qualities that he is lacking for a fully rounded portrayal. The climactic passages in 'Sanctus fortis' and the attack on 'Take me away' are really not for him, but for much else in the score I am thankful that he recorded the part.

John Mitchinson's recorded Gerontius (with Rattle) has not met with universal approval, the undeniable beat in his voice troubling some listeners. Certainly in live performance I have found him less constrained and with a much freer tone. He has the full vocal resources to do the part justice, from the hushed opening to Part I to the demands of 'Sanctus fortis'. There are some magical moments, such as his colouring of the word "bewilderment" (fig 34), and the lovely head tones at the reprise of 'Sanctus fortis' (fig 53) which expand seamlessly into full voice. There is real fear in the voice as he conjures up the Demons in his mind (fig 58-61), and there is real heartbreak in 'Take me away', without becoming maudlin. This is a vital portrayal which goes right to the heart of the character.

Perhaps the most sheerly beautiful (vocally) assumption of the role of Gerontius is that by Anthony Rolfe Johnson (under Handley). A voice of much lighter means than Mitchinson's, he too has the resources to meet all the vocal demands, but I have the overriding impression of blandness in his reading. Yes, the opening is exquisitely sung, but there is no real anguish. Where Mitchinson (and Pears) conjured up horror at the vision of Demons in Part I, with Rolfe Johnson the feeling is almost casual. The opening of Part II finds him at his best: "I went to sleep" (fig 4) is a real awakening and Elgar's 'parlando' markings are observed to wonderful effect. But when we reach 'Take me away' there is no real emotion, just good, clean singing.

Arthur Davies appears as Gerontius twice on these recordings. When I first heard his performance with Hickox I was bowled over by the sheer generosity of voice in the part. Here, at last, was a tenor to match his namesake, Tudor Davies. There are many places in the score where one simply wants sumptuous tenor tone to match the passion in the music, eg. in Part II, "But hark! a grand mysterious harmony..." (fig 71), and Davies provides this in abundance. His is a thrilling performance 'per se', but characterisation is not consistent. With Svetlanov, five years earlier, and caught "on the wing" as it were in a live performance,

the voice is even more free in tone, but there is a tendency to a lachrymose delivery and much use of the glottal stop, presumably for dramatic effect. 'Sanctus fortis' is taken at a very hectic pace by Svetlanov, leaving Davies no room for dynamic shading (and probably the cause of some doubtful verbal juggling!) 'Take me away' is probably even more exciting than with Hickox and is given a forward momentum by the conductor whereby the singer can express the heartbreak without becoming sentimental.

Boult's casting of Nicolai Gedda as Gerontius caused a few ripples back in 1976. This much-admired tenor had previously recorded 'Elijah' and 'Messiah' (neither with a British conductor) to give notice that the English oratorio 'tradition' was not alien to him. I was excited by his performance at that time, probably because he opened my eyes to the full operatic potential of the role, having been so used to Richard Lewis as the "norm". I am not sure that this excitement has remained. I say "not sure" because it is a performance I "blow hot and cold" over. Currently, I find it a heart-warming, sometimes thrilling re-creation of the role, but set beside the two interpreters yet to be discussed, it is not fully satisfying. Gedda's English is almost wholly idiomatic, only the occasional too-open vowel, as in "manhood" and "veneration" betraying his non-native background. In Part I and the latter part of Part II he is almost perfect, characterising vividly and scrupulous over dynamics. Only in the exchanges with the Angel in Part II does he appear a little brash, the tone consistently open and bright and, consequently, tiring on the ear.

The final two interpreters of Gerontius are Heddle Nash and Jon Vickers. No serious lover of *Gerontius* should be without either performance. They are very different interpretations, yet each reaches the very heart of both music and character as no others. The voices themselves are quite different in timbre, Nash essentially a lyric tenor, Vickers a dramatic tenor, though that is over-simplifying the matter. Both singers command attention from their first utterances, both for beauty of voice and for interpretative powers. Both conjure up a picture of a man 'in extremis'. Both produce beautiful head tones at "That I am going, that I am no more" (one bar after fig 25). Both begin 'Sanctus fortis' 'mf' and observe the 'semplice e dolce' at fig 44. Both....but no. I could go on pin-pointing so many places in the score where Elgar's detailed markings really tell in these interpretations. If I might choose just one more highlight for each : at fig 53, the 'pp' reprise of "Sanctus fortis", Vickers also observes the 'piangendo' and produces an ethereal head voice which he then gradually mixes with full chest voice as the music expands - all quite seamless and creating a heart-stopping moment; Nash's "Novissima hora est" (fig 66) is the most moving and most beautiful of all, and the ensuing phrases, up to when he expires at fig 68, make me really believe that he is "wearied" and at the end of all he can bear. No words can do full justice to these interpretations; they demand to be heard. If, under threat of rack and thumbscrew, I was forced to choose between these two singers, I think it would have to be Vickers for the sheer thrill and open-hearted generosity of his tenor voice.

## SECTION 5 - The Angel

The casting of the Angel has been particularly successful in *Gerontius* recordings. There is not one of the nine mezzo/contraltos who fails to bring some insight or special quality to the part. However, what is your view of an angel? It is definitely male; but the voice is that of a mezzo-soprano or contralto. There are, of course, no real problems with this, especially if

one can take Cherubino, Oktavian etc. But there is a danger that the singer might sound rather matronly - or perhaps I should say motherly - which gives quite the wrong effect. If I include Helen Watts, Alfreda Hodgson, Marjorie Thomas, Gladys Ripley and Constance Shacklock in this category, this is not to denigrate them, for they all give quite lovely performances; but if one wants something a little more self-effacing of femininity, one must look to Yvonne Minton, Felicity Palmer, Catherine Wyn-Rogers or Janet Baker.

Margaret Balfour, Elgar's Angel, has a voice which moves me very much. There is not much to judge her by, but enough to wish there were more! Her 'Farewell' is sung with gorgeous velvety tone. The timbre of the voice is of a type rarely heard these days. Amongst the complete recordings, Gladys Ripley and Constance Shacklock come nearest in style. Ripley (Sargent 1945) is consistently warm and comforting, a voice one feels almost able to wrap around one to keep out cold winter draughts! One of my personal testing points for any Angel is the launching of the duet beginning "A presage falls upon thee" (fig 26), and here Gladys Ripley is radiant and the blending of her voice with that of Heddle Nash is matched for sheer beauty only by Janet Baker and Richard Lewis (Barbirolli 1964). Constance Shacklock, in Barbirolli's 1957 Rome performance, has some wayward intonation to begin with, but settles to give a satisfying performance overall. There is something deeply affecting about her characterisation - something indefinable. At the words "And I will come and wake thee on the morrow" (in the 'Farewell' three bars before fig 134) there is a smile in the voice which lifts the spirit; after all, the message is full of hope and promise. A wondrous moment.

Marjorie Thomas (Sargent 1955) is a generally sensitive Angel, but surprisingly bland in places and quite fails to move me. However, her rendering of the 'Farewell', poised and beautiful, redeems much. Alfreda Hodgson is the one cherishable ingredient of the Gibson performance I simply could not be without. Her opening 'Angel's Song' is a trifle edgy, but thereafter there is one glorious moment after another. Her utterance of "Yes, for one moment thou shalt see thy Lord - one moment" (two bars before fig 56) never fails to bring a lump to my throat, not only for the tonal quality of the voice, but for the intensity of meaning she brings to this phrase. She is consistently responsive to the text and secure in all the extremes of the role. Thus, her build-up to "Praise to the Holiest" with its climactic A flat is ecstatic and exciting; her final words, "Brother dear", sung 'dolcissimo' as marked, are truly melting. This is a jewel of a performance in a less than lustrous setting.

Helen Watts, for Boult, is not as vocally resplendent as other recorded Angels, yet she gives a fascinating account of the role, constantly alert to verbal nuance, not least in her exchanges with Gedda's Gerontius. Her account of the "stigmata" beginning at fig 58, "There was a mortal who is now above...", aided by Boult's eerily brilliant accompaniment, represents the height of her art. Catherine Wyn-Rogers, for Handley, does not have the warmth of tone which I find to be a prerequisite for an ideal Angel. To be fair, much of what she does is very good, even though I have a feeling that the recording does not do her justice - I know it doesn't, having heard her in live performance! She simply does not sound at ease for much of the time, and a rather neutral quality predominates. However, at the section "Thy judgement now is near..." (fig 102) she conjures up a real frisson of mystery, spirituality and drama, she sings beautifully - and all is forgiven!

Felicity Palmer appears with Hickox and also on the live Svetlanov recording, partnering Arthur Davies on both occasions. It is a voice which arouses much controversy in Elgar recordings, and it seems to me that it is a voice which either you can take or you can't. I can! There is little to choose between the performances although the live occasion engenders more electricity between Palmer and Davies. The "duet" is particularly lovely, beautifully blended. Miss Palmer brings her considerable dramatic gifts to bear on the 'stigmata' passage in both recordings; but under Svetlanov her 'Farewell' has a radiance which is missing with Hickox. The phrase (marked 'dolcissimo') "Shall tend and nurse thee, as thou liest" (two bars after fig 131) shows her at her most melting.

Yvonne Minton's Angel is one of the glories of the Britten recording. The opening 'Angel's Song' immediately marks her out as an Angel of special qualities. Her last "Alleluia" (one bar after fig 15), sung 'pp', would melt the stoniest heart, as would "You cannot now cherish a wish which ought not to be wished" (four bars after fig 20). With a fine sensitivity to words, combined with dark, honeyed tone, Yvonne Minton shines throughout the work. Even Britten's brisk pace for the 'Farewell' (thus avoiding any hint of sentimentality) cannot rob her of poise or dignity.

Janet Baker has recorded the role of the Angel twice : with Barbirolli (1964) and Rattle. More than twenty years separate the recordings and both bring huge rewards. There is no denying that the voice is far fresher in 1964 where Miss Baker delivers a very dramatic reading of the role, no doubt spurred on by Barbirolli. The interpretation has softened and deepened by 1986, but it is to the earlier recording I turn again and again. As when discussing the Gerontius of Nash and of Vickers, words cannot adequately do justice to the sheer thrill of Baker's performances, but a few examples must be given. As with Yvonne Minton, the poise on the last section of the 'Angel's Song' is exquisite with Barbirolli; with Rattle it remains very beautiful and there is even an added warmth. "You cannot now cherish a wish..." in the 1964 recording is one of those phrases that simply lives on in the mind - totally unforgettable. Staying with 1964, Baker's launching of the "duet" 'A presage falls upon thee' is simply glorious and, as already implied, with Richard Lewis an ideal blend is achieved to magical effect. With John Mitchinson (Rattle) this section lacks a sense of repose. Only Janet Baker, in both recordings, can match Alfreda Hodgson in the section "Yes, for one moment thou shalt see thy Lord - one moment". With Baker I hear it with tears pricking my eyes. Throughout her exchanges with Mitchinson's Gerontius, she achieves a stillness not always in evidence under Barbirolli. And so I could go on. If you want to judge for yourself, I would ask you to listen to the 'Farewell' under Barbirolli. This is glorious singing by any standard with some heart-stopping moments, eg. "I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee" (figs 128-129) - this is surely the peak of Janet Baker's art.

## **SECTION 6 - The Priest/Angel of the Agony**

At the end of Part I we first hear the third soloist, the bass, or baritone, who intones "Proficiscere, anima Christiana!" - "Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul!" - a magnificent set piece which brings Part I to an incandescent close. Our soloist is heard again in the Angel of the Agony's grave utterances in Part II. Much has been said and written as to the need for two different voices in these parts : a baritone for the Priest and a bass for the Angel of the Agony. Certainly the high tessitura of the Priest's music would seem to call for a

baritone, whilst the Angel of the Agony ideally needs a true bass to bring the necessary weight to the part.

In Elgar's recorded extracts we have the second half (with chorus) of the Priest's part, and the whole of the Angel of the Agony's solo as sung by Herbert Heyner, and again the whole of the Angel of the Agony's solo as sung by Horace Stevens at Hereford. Heyner would seem to have the vocal means to encompass both parts and his Angel of the Agony is certainly very dramatic. But it is to Horace Stevens I constantly turn in this piece. There is, perhaps, too much use of snatched breath for dramatic effect, but the voice is just right; he instils both authority and awe. Elgar's accompaniment sends shivers down the spine. This is probably the most moving account on disc.

Sargent's 1945 recording is the only one to utilise two singers in the parts of Priest and Angel of the Agony. This may well have been the right idea, but is badly let down by Dennis Noble's Priest. I fail to understand the almost universal approval for this performance. In his contribution to the volume 'Elgar Studies' Michael Kennedy, in discussing Elgar interpreters, writes : "Dennis Noble's 'Proficiscere' has a clarion quality all too often missing". Unfortunately I cannot share his enthusiasm. I find Noble's tone dry and uningratiating; he brings a laboured treatment of individual notes rather than smooth phrasing; there is a total lack of warmth. Elgar's detailed dynamic markings are largely ignored. The Elgar Society JOURNAL's Editor has referred to the worst fault of all ('Random Ramblings', November 1994), a fault I myself have drawn attention to on numerous occasions : the long notes (six crotchet beats) on the second syllable of "mundo" and on "world" are alarmingly cut to just two beats, leaving gaping holes in the texture of the music, the effect of the underlying changing harmonies being quite lost. Indeed, throughout this section long notes are often cut short, even his very last note. No, I cannot endorse the good opinion of this performance. In the same recording Sargent has Norman Walker as the Angel of the Agony. As a performance it is good and solid, but lacking in real imagination.

The Priest is a figure of authority, yet is present to bring comfort to the dying Gerontius - a sympathetic figure. Both aspects are there in Elgar's music : a commanding beginning; then a softening and warmth on the word "God" in the phrase "Go, in the name of God" (fig 70); a 'diminuendo' on the words "who bled for thee", and again on the words "Holy Spirit", where notes and dynamics seem to indicate a caressing of the words. The Australian John Cameron (Sargent 1955) is a lightweight baritone and shows ease in the upper reaches of the music. He is exemplary in his adherence to the score's markings and his tonal colouring encompasses the full range of Elgar's expectations. Above all, there is great beauty of tone. His voice lacks the required weight for the Angel of the Agony, although it is a beautiful performance which is, unfortunately, not matched by Sargent's rather pedestrian reading of the section.

A singer who really does fulfil the above-mentioned requirements for the Priest, as well as having the gravitas for the Angel of the Agony, is Boult's Robert Lloyd, to my mind the most successful singer on disc to combine these roles. As the Priest, Lloyd has the power and authority for the opening - also great dignity. He observes all the dynamics quite scrupulously, softening his tone beautifully where required, to astonishing effect. He manages the high tessitura well. Occasionally the long phrases find him a little short on

breath, but the overall magnificence remains - and he shows that those long-held notes really count for something! Boult gives a very measured reading of this section, in accord with his intensely spiritual overview of the work. There is no undue haste in easing the soul of Gerontius out of this world. This performance is quite special. Lloyd's Angel of the Agony is equally magnificent. There is a huge ruggedness and a sense of anguish which is truly contained; he achieves a real 'pp' in his handling of the wide dynamic range; there is warmth which is not contrived. The only blot occurs when he splits the phrase "glorious/home" when the orchestra swells in a sensuous arc, but it is a small price to pay for such a moving account.

Kim Borg (Barbirolli 1964) has had a rough ride from critics over the years, mainly due to his unidiomatic English, but he gives a beautiful account of the Priest - very warm and sympathetic, and it is a lovely sound. As the Angel of the Agony, the phrasing is a little choppy and he needs to get hold of the consonants more firmly, but it is by no means a bad performance. Gwynne Howell (Hickox), a singer I admire deeply, is sorely tested by the high, repeated notes of the Priest and there is some less than secure intonation. As the Angel of the Agony he exudes power, if not subtlety. I do not feel that he has done himself full justice in this recording. Benjamin Luxon's Priest (for Gibson) is much too hectoring; his "Go!" sounds like a rather cross schoolmaster shouting "Get out!" to a troublesome pupil. Hardly the tones for a deathbed! His Angel of the Agony is sung with a fine legato (in spite of the inherent vibrato in his voice, which troubles me not), but he is too overt, almost too expressive when restraint is needed; the drama should be internalised, the anguish felt rather than thrust full in the face!

Norman Bailey (Svetlanov) reminds us what a cruelly exposed first entry it is for the Priest, coming "cold" to it in live performance. Bailey makes a very rough start, but he quickly settles to give a moving account of the music, although some of the phrasing is choppy. Elgar wanted the voice of a Wotan for the Angel of the Agony and in Bailey we have a favourite interpreter of Wagner's god. His singing here is very satisfying. The weight of tone is right and the long-breathed phrasing is helped by Svetlanov's relatively brisk tempo. Marian Nowkowski (Barbirolli, Rome 1957), a much underrated singer in his time, manages the first entry of the Priest in a "live" context much better than Bailey. He brings a full, rich tone to the Priest and is not troubled by the tessitura. His Angel of the Agony is just as satisfying, if a little generalised, but there is a disfiguring moment at fig 113 on the phrase "where they shall ever gaze on Thee"; Nowkowski uses an upward 'portamento' on the second syllable of "ever", followed by a large breath before attacking the word "gaze". Not a comfortable moment.

Handley's Michael George is prodigious in his breath control; as both Priest and Angel of the Agony there is seamless phrasing. As the Priest this (combined with the controlled approach to dynamics) makes him a very comforting figure. His Angel of the Agony opens with a curiously muffled quality on the high Ds and E flats, but he gives a satisfying account of the solo, without achieving the fully searing quality which one finds with Robert Lloyd and Horace Stevens. John Shirley-Quirk appears for both Britten and Rattle and, like Michael George, he has tremendous breath control, achieving long, beautifully-shaped phrasing. His dark-hued baritone fully encompasses both roles. Inevitably, the voice is fresher in his earlier recording with Britten, but ultimately I would choose the performance under Rattle

to represent this singer. His Priest has command and warmth in equal measure and his Angel of the Agony is filled with anguish and awe. In this latter part, he really does observe the 'pp' (teneramente) and 'p' (dolce) to spine-tingling effect. Rattle's accompaniment here achieves the right proportions of fear and comfort.

## **SECTION 7 - Conclusions**

Going through all these recordings within a relatively short space of time has not wearied the ear of the work; rather has it enriched and energised it and left me wishing for more. There are always artists who one hoped would have recorded the work or one hopes might yet do so, but one must not be greedy! We are lucky indeed to have so many recordings to choose amongst. I am not going to be presumptuous in recommending a recording outright - and nothing I have written is going to influence firm adherents to particular recordings or performers - but recently I had cause to introduce *Gerontius* to an acquaintance for whom it was his first experience of the work. I thought hard and long which recording to use, but I settled for Handley as a good all-round representation in modern sound.

Which recording do I turn to most frequently for sheer pleasure? That is easy: always Barbirolli's 1964 reading. However, in my "desert island" mood I conjure up my own personal ideal : Barbirolli, Vickers, Baker (1964), Lloyd, CBSO & Choir. Mind you, next week it could be Rattle, Nash, Hodgson..... See? The permutations are endless!

## **SECTION 8 - Discography**

### **Extracts**

Elgar (Royal Albert Hall, 1927)

Steuart Wilson, Margaret Balfour, Herbert Heyner, Royal Choral Society, RAH Orchestra  
(EMI - CDS7 54560-2)

Elgar (Hereford Festival, 1927)

Tudor Davies, Margaret Balfour, Horace Stevens, Three Choirs Festival Chorus, LSO  
(EMI - CDS7 54560-2)

### **Complete Recordings**

Sargent (1945)

Heddle Nash, Gladys Ripley, Dennis Noble, Norman Walker, Huddersfield Choral Society, Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra  
(*Testament* - SBT 2025)

Sargent (1955)

Richard Lewis, Marjorie Thomas, John Cameron, Huddersfield Choral Society, Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra  
(EMI - CHS7 63376-2)

Barbirolli (1957)

Jon Vickers, Constance Shacklock, Marian Nowkowski, Orcestra Sinfonica e Coro della RAI di

Roma  
(*Arkadia - AKI 584*)

Barbirolli (1964)  
Richard Lewis, Janet Baker, Kim Borg, Ambrosian Singers, Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus,  
Hallé Choir and Orchestra  
(*EMI - CMS7 63185-2*)

Britten (1972)  
Peter Pears, Yvonne Minton, John Shirley-Quirk, Choir of King's College, Cambridge, London  
Symphony Chorus and Orchestra  
(*Decca - 448 170-2DF2*)

Boult (1976)  
Nicolai Gedda, Helen Watts, Robert Lloyd, London Philharmonic Choir, John Alldis Choir,  
New Philharmonia Orchestra  
(*EMI - CDS7 47208-8*)

Gibson (1976)  
Robert Tear, Alfreda Hodgson, Benjamin Luxon, Scottish National Chorus and Orchestra  
(*CRD - CRD3326/7*)

Svetlanov (1983)  
Arthur Davies, Felicity Palmer, Norman Bailey, London Symphony Chorus, SSR State  
Symphony Orchestra  
(*Melodiya - LP - ROCT 5289/90*)

Rattle (1987)  
John Mitchinson, Dame Janet Baker, John Shirley-Quirk, City of Birmingham Symphony  
Chorus and Orchestra  
(*EMI - CDS7 49549-2*)

Hickox (1988)  
Arthur Davies, Felicity Palmer, Gwynne Howell, London Symphony Chorus and Orchestra  
(*Chandos - CHAN8641/2*)

Handley (1993)  
Anthony Rolfe-Johnson, Catherine Wyn-Rogers, Michael George, Royal Liverpool  
Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra  
(*EMI - CD-EMXD2500*)

Hill (1997)  
William Kendall, Matthew Best, Sarah Fryer, Waynflete Singers, Bournemouth Symphony  
Chorus and Orchestra  
(*Naxos - 8.553885/6*)