

The Dream of Gerontius, op 38

An oratorio for mezzo-soprano, tenor, bass, full choir and orchestra, based on the poem by Cardinal John Newman. The oratorio is in two parts but is often performed without an interval.

Approximate Length: Part 1 : 35 minutes; Part 2 : 60 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 3 October 1900

Venue: Birmingham Triennial Festival

Conductor: Dr Hans Richter

Commissioned by: Birmingham Festival Committee

Dedicated to: AMDG (Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam)

Cardinal Newman's poem tells of the journey of a man's soul after death - Gerontius may be translated roughly as *old man*. Elgar was given a copy of the poem in 1889 as a wedding present. But, while he undoubtedly toyed with the idea of setting it to music intermittently over the intervening period, the decision to do so for the 1900 Birmingham festival appears to have been taken somewhat at the last minute - his earlier ideas for the festival describe a work which eventually emerged as *The Apostles*.

The first performance was not a success. Neither W C Stockley, the chorus master, nor Hans Richter, the conductor, had grasped the complexity of the work and allowed insufficient time for rehearsals. But the more perceptive members of the audience recognised the work's merit. These included Julius Butts, director of the Lower Rhine Festival, who staged the work in Dusseldorf in 1901. The performance, to a packed audience of 2500, was an unqualified success and was followed in March 1903 by further acclaimed performances on successive nights - the first by the Halle Orchestra, under Richter in Manchester, the second in Hanley with Elgar himself conducting.

Today, the work is undoubtedly the most popular of all Elgar's choral works, and indeed among the most frequently performed of all his works. Surely no-one can remain unmoved by the priest's invocation to Gerontius - as part 1 ends - to 'go forth' ('Proficiscere, anima Christiana'); nor, in part 2, by the chorus of 'Praise to the Holiest', the words of which were also taken to form the well-known hymn.

But these excerpts should not be allowed overshadow much other beautiful writing in the piece. And, while early commentators may have been wary of the work's essentially Catholic stance (the composer Charles Villiers Stanford is reported to have said the work 'stank of incense'), most now are struck more by the dramatic intensity and integrity of the subject. The work continues to be performed regularly throughout Britain.

3 October 2000 saw the centenary of the work's first performance, leading to a much increased interest in the work. In recognition of this interest, and as a service both to performers and to visitors to this website, we have expanded our coverage of the work by

adding new pages providing more detailed coverage of the history of the work and of the coming year's events. Follow the links in the box below to reach these additional pages.