

The Kingdom, Op 51

An oratorio for soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and 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 : 55 minutes; Part 2 : 40 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 3 October 1906

Venue: Birmingham Festival

Conductor: the composer

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

Elgar had originally planned *The Kingdom* as the third part of *The Apostles* but, delayed by illness, and realising the enormity of the task he had set himself and the scale of the work that would result, he sensibly decided to make *The Kingdom* a separate, self-contained work. By the time he came to complete it, he was already planning a third, related oratorio, provisionally entitled *The Last Judgement*. This never saw the light of day, Elgar believing by then that the British public was tiring of large-scale choral works.

Within this context, Elgar found the room to explore at a somewhat leisurely pace the descent of the holy spirit at Pentecost and the foundation and early activities of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. Elgar made Peter the focus of the work, providing a forceful and impressive role that contrasts with the rather underdeveloped role for Peter in *The Apostles*.

The work shares a number of themes with *The Apostles* and the same leitmotif scheme - Jaeger noted 79 in the work, compared with 92 in *The Apostles*. But it would be totally wrong to regard *The Kingdom* as little more than a reworking of previously used material. The two works are clearly complimentary and are often performed in close succession, but *The Kingdom* also stands as a masterpiece in its own right. Indeed, Elgar's close friend Frank Schuster confided to conductor Sir Adrian Boult that, compared with *The Kingdom*, he considered *The Dream of Gerontius* to be the work of a raw amateur. It contains much genuinely original material. The soprano solo *The Sun Goeth Down* is particularly beautiful, and the powerful New Faith theme, which may have provided the inspiration for the popular 1960s song *Softly as I Leave You*, first recorded by Matt Monroe and subsequently by Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, is as stirring as anything Elgar wrote.