

Salisbury Cathedral: The Dream of Gerontius

April 2nd 2022

This was an absolutely inspiring event. Despite a surging number of Covid absentees, Salisbury Musical Society was able to present one of its finest concerts last Saturday. *The Dream of Gerontius* is a poem first published by Cardinal (now Saint) John Henry Newman in 1866. Sir Edward Elgar knew the poem well and decided to set it to music for the 1900 Birmingham Triennial Festival. In so doing he produced one of the greatest choral masterpieces ever composed. To hear it performed in Salisbury Cathedral in the most impassioned and committed way was a privilege of the highest order, especially at this time of global unease and foreboding. There cannot have been a single person, whether performer or audience, who did not feel a strong sense of uplift as they left the Cathedral for home.

Elgar wrote for a large orchestra, together with three soloists, semi-chorus and main chorus. By an extraordinary feat of organisation lead by David Halls (SMS Director and Conductor) and Daphne Moody (Leader of the invited orchestra) the necessary number of professional players was found. These included not only a full complement of strings, woodwind, brass and percussion, but also some less-often heard instruments, including harp, bass clarinet, bass drum, and a splendid contra-bassoon. So perfect was their cohesion that it was hard to remember that these musicians were individually invited for the occasion - not an established orchestra. Particularly memorable moments were the hushed opening prelude of Part 1, the glorious string introduction to Part 2, the fireworks of the demons, and of course the glorious climaxes of Part 2. The momentary glimpse of the Almighty, where Elgar instructs every instrument to give its maximum power for a split second, was stunning. It is interesting that this - the most significant moment of the whole work - was only added at a late stage to the score at the suggestion of Augustus Jaeger, Elgar's friend, adviser and publisher. Elgar is reported to have agreed and said "it's biggity-big".

Turning to the all-important soloists, there were magnificent contributions by Paul Nilon (Gerontius, and Soul of Gerontius), Catherine Carby (The Angel) and Jonathan Lemalu (Priest and Angel of the Agony). All three have distinguished operatic careers, wholly appropriate for the dramatic nature of Elgar's score. In Part 1 the dying Gerontius experiences emotions ranging from quiet acceptance to terrifying fear, vividly portrayed by Nilon in a passage including a fortissimo high B flat. As the Soul of Gerontius he continued his wonderful portrayal of the preparation for judgement, the astounding glance of God, and the start of a sojourn in purgatory. Catherine Carby's beautiful voice, wonderful diction, and huge range was a joy to hear. One of her most affecting passages was the Angel's duet with the Soul of Gerontius, where she guides, protects, and answers his questions. In Newman's poem the Angel is male, but it is thought that Elgar chose the part to be sung by a female to bring out the deep bond in the relationship, reminiscent of a Wagnerian love duet. Jonathan Lemalu was the ideal Priest/Angel of the Agony, with a rich bass-baritone voice, and a dramatic dynamic range well demonstrated in the "Go forth upon thy journey" music of Part 1.

The SMS choir, together with the semi-chorus, were on absolutely top form. At various stages they represented Assistants (earthly friends of the dying Gerontius), Demons, Angelicals and Souls in Purgatory. Although reduced in numbers by Covid, they were still able to project the main choruses above the very substantial volume of orchestral sound. Only in the demons' chorus were they sometimes overwhelmed by the incredibly exciting brass and percussion braying, howling and crashing. There was wonderful control of dynamics and tempi – which always seemed exactly right

under David Halls' superb direction. The sopranos deserve special praise not only for their huge stamina, even an effortless high B, but for their exquisite handling of top register soft notes, especially as the Choir of Angelicals singing Newman's beautiful text in the Praise to the Holiest in the Height section of part 2. Although Elgar said to Jaeger that he would not be including "church songs and rubbish" he did include some very realistic plain-chant in part 1, sung antiphonally between semi-chorus and main chorus, with organ accompaniment. This was exquisitely done by the SMS choir.

Mention must be made of Jon Hampton's excellent programme notes, which vividly describe the origins of Elgar's masterpiece, including its unfortunate first performance in Birmingham, and its rehabilitation via performances in Düsseldorf. It is also worth pointing out that it had a sticky time at first in getting performed in English Cathedrals because of its strongly Roman Catholic doctrinal theology relating to Purgatory. Elgar himself had to concede to the text being bowdlerised for some performances before 1910.

Only one thing jarred for this reviewer – was it necessary or appropriate to have a lengthy interval with refreshments after only 30 minutes, and at the point at which Gerontius has just died? Would a few minutes of silence have been more fitting?

That aside, this was a wonderful, moving and uplifting concert, for which everyone concerned deserves the utmost congratulations and gratitude.

Richard Godfrey