

Elgar, who many think of as a quintessentially English composer, was far more influenced by European music and in particular by Wagner. And it's interesting to reflect that we might have been listening to Antonín Dvořák's *Gerontius*: the Czech composer considered setting it fifteen years before Elgar's version and even discussed it with Cardinal Newman before abandoning the idea. Meanwhile, Elgar also contemplated the weighty task for several years before finally beginning work on an abridged version of Newman's poem.

*Gerontius* had a famously catastrophic premiere in Birmingham in 1900, with an unsympathetic chorus master and a conductor who was very sympathetic but who had far too little time to study the score and rehearse the forces. Luckily, after successful performances in Germany (appropriate with a work of Wagnerian construction), the next, and much more successful, English performance in 1902 was in Sheffield, so it was very appropriate that the Sheffield Chorale crossed the Pennines to join St George's Singers on Sunday night.

They, along with Stockport Symphony Orchestra and the three soloists at Gorton Monastery in June 2015 had several advantages over those who first attempted to perform the work over a century ago. *Gerontius* remains a fiendishly difficult piece, but they love the music and know how it should sound. Their chorus master and conductor were one and the same, Neil Taylor. Under his expert direction the chorus was unfailingly accurate both in pitch and rhythm. They have to play grieving friends, snarling demons and soaring angels and did all three with aplomb in a piece fraught with pitfalls that strike terror into the heart. It's every choral singer's nightmare to go *Ha ha!* in the wrong place. No one did. It's the sopranos' nightmare that they will falter on a particular high and exposed moment when they sing *Praise to the holiest*. They were spot on and beautifully ethereal. It's everyone's nightmare that after *Lord, thou hast been my refuge*, the orchestra will begin *Softly and gently* but in a slightly sharper key. They didn't: the choir stayed securely on pitch. Both the full choir and the semi-chorus drawn from it though not separate as Elgar preferred were beautifully balanced with plenty of dynamic variety and the important leads and lines coming through strongly.

Part of the difficulty in *The Dream* – indeed in much of Elgar's music – is in following his meticulous markings, particularly the constant changes of tempo, rits, ralls, largamentes and accels which are such an essential part of its character. The great majority of these went exactly to plan. In a work of such passion, all must keep an ice cool nerve, and bar a couple of minor glitches, they did exactly that. All(!) they had to do was follow Neil Taylor's crystal clear beat, and I'm delighted to say the audience did so too, giving us that magical silence between the final bar and the applause.

Elgar is a very fine but challenging orchestrator, and St George's Singers were very fortunate to have the collaboration of a local orchestra – Stockport Symphony – that matches their quality. Like the choir, members of SSO are amateurs, but one would hardly know it. The band works with conductors and soloists of great standing and presents a substantial programme of its own which includes many challenging works. In such orchestras it can be the strings that sound below par but this certainly isn't the case with SSO.

Marcus Farnsworth is well known to St George's Singers – indeed, he's now their president – and so an ideal choice. The baritone has two roles to sing: the Priest who consoles the dying Gerontius and sends him on his journey, and the stern but pleading Angel of the Agony. Marcus was excellent and rock solid as both. Helen Anne Gregory was a (very!) last minute replacement for the original Angel who was indisposed. Helen is still a young singer, having graduated from the RNCM only three years ago. It was her first public performance of the Angel – and I'm sure by no means her last. It's a challenge for the most experienced of singers, but Helen carried it off admirably and St George's were lucky to find her at such short notice. Being placed so she had to sing at an angle across the auditorium in order to see the conductor's beat meant that occasionally her voice didn't come through strongly to the back, but the acoustics and logistics were more responsible for that than the singer, and it was far preferable to forcing the tone or the music falling apart.

Gerontius himself is at the centre of the drama throughout, and it's a challenging and magnificent role. A few years ago, St George's Singers engaged the great bass-baritone Willard White who made an ideal Elijah for their

performance at the Bridgewater Hall. Joshua Ellicott may not look like the old man implied by the name Gerontius (and indeed he isn't) but it's hard to imagine a more perfect performance of the part. The singer has to run the gamut of emotions from despair to elation, and balance the operatic with the spiritual. Joshua is experienced and expert in a remarkable range of music and was a compelling Gerontius.

In many ways, Gorton Monastery is the perfect setting for this work with its text rooted in Roman Catholicism. It's a jewel of a building designed by Pugin and was being built in 1865, the year Cardinal Newman wrote the poem. Manchester is very fortunate that it's still standing and in use thanks to a trust which rescued it when it was abandoned and fell prey to decay and to vandals. It's capacious and has modern facilities and heating. What it doesn't have is perfect acoustics. I've never performed there and so I don't know how it is for the artists, but I'm sure they felt they had to work very hard to project (and clearly did so). It isn't that it's over resonant like some large churches, but for the audience there almost seems to be a barrier to the sound reaching them. It would be very hard to raise the singers' seating which might help the balance, though there were no times when the chorus was completely drowned out by the orchestra. People are used to hearing performances on radio and CD where voices are unnaturally enhanced by electronic wizardry. The reality of live performance is different and the balance isn't always perfect in purpose built concert halls with tuneable acoustics and fully professional forces. This makes the achievement by Sunday's performers all the more creditable. They kept their capacity audience engaged throughout in a deeply felt performance which was rewarded with a very warm appreciation.

Donald Judge