# The Dream of Gerontius

Words by John Henry Newman Music by Edward Elgar

## CENTENNIAL PERFORMANCE

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Program Notes by Nicholas Temperley with the complete text

John Henry Newman (1801–1890) was the leader of the Roman Catholic revival in England, where, since the Reformation, Catholics had suffered civil disabilities, removed only in 1829. Newman was ordained an Anglican priest in 1824, and led the Oxford (Anglo-Catholic) movement within the Church of England before converting to Rome in 1845. He was recordained priest in 1847, and established the Oratory of St. Philip Neri at Birmingham, where he spent the rest of his life, becoming a cardinal in 1879. He was a distinguished writer and thinker in both prose and poetry.

When Newman wrote "The Dream of Gerontius" in 1865, he was prompted by the memory of Father Joseph Gordon, a colleague at the Oratory who had died suddenly in 1857. But it also enshrined ideas about the human soul that had been in his mind for a long time. In a sermon he spoke of the soul going forth "as a stranger on a journey. Man seems to die and to be no more, when he is but quitting us, and is really beginning to live. Then he sees sights which before it did not even enter into his mind to conceive . . . Just now he was lying on the bed of sickness, but in that moment of death what an awful change has come over him! What a crisis before him! There is a stillness in the room that lately held him; nothing is doing there, for he is gone, he now belongs to others; he now belongs entirely to the Lord who brought him; to Him he returns; but whether to be lodged safely in His place of hope, or to be imprisoned against the great Day, that is another matter, that depends on the deeds done in the body, whether good or evil."

There you have the essence of the poem. Gerontius, a generic "old man", is dying. We follow his emotional journey as he leaves his earthly life, sent on his way by a priest, and then, guided by angels, comes to a momentary vision of God enthroned among the heavenly host. Finally he is led away to serve his time in purgatory.

"The Dream of Gerontius" is one of the most powerful religious poems of the 19th century. It was not written with music in mind. To set it to music called for a towering musical technique and imagination. It had been considered and rejected by several composers before Elgar took up the formidable challenge.

Edward Elgar (1857–1934), best known to Americans for his "Pomp and Circumstance" march, is considered the greatest English-born composer since the death of Henry Purcell in 1695. His stirring orchestral and choral works have been enjoying a notable revival in Europe in recent decades. During his early struggles to make his way as a musician in the cathedral city of Worcester, he encountered prejudice due to his Catholic faith as well as his low-class origins. But his reputation slowly grew, with successes like the Serenade for Strings and his first choral work, The Black Knight. By the late 1890s he was beginning to be seen as a new force in the conservative, Anglican world of the provincial musical festival, which had only recently come to terms with Brahms. Audiences were excited, if somewhat bewidlered, by music that embraced the high drama of Verdi or Berlioz and the intense emotionalism of Wagner. Elgar now found himself being courted to contribute new compositions to the festivals.

In November 1898 he was invited to compose a sacred choral work for the 1900 Birmingham Triennial Festival, where Mendelssohn's Elijah had premiered in 1846. He first offered a work about St. Augustine, but this was considered too controversial by the festival committee. Other ideas were mulled over. For many years he had been attracted to Newman's poem: he even gave a copy to his fiancée in 1889. When he proposed it to the committee, there was certainly some hesitation, in view of its explicitly Catholic theological content. But Newman was a widely admired figure. Anglicans were already familiar with two of the hymns in "The Dream of Gerontius" ("Firmly I believe and truly" and "Praise to the holiest in the height"), while Newman's earlier hymn, "Lead, kindly light," was a long-established favourite. In Birmingham especially, he had enjoyed high local esteem. Then, in June 1899, Elgar scored his first national success with his Enigma Variations, conducted at St. James's Hall. London, by Hans Richter. The festival committee now swallowed its misgivings, and on 1 January 1900 accepted Elgar's offer of a choral work based on "The Dream of Gerontius".

The composer pulled together ideas he had been trying out for some time, and worked feverishly to complete what was to be an enormously rich and complex score. August Jaeger, his publisher and closest musical adviser (depicted as "Nimrod" in the Enigma Variations), advised him to suppress references to Mary and Joseph, in order to mitigate the expected criticism of the work on sectarian grounds, but Elgar was determined not to water down the essentials of Newman's poem, though he made many judicious cuts to reduce its length. He frankly stated his approach: "Gerontius is a man like us and not a priest or a saint but a sinner . . . a worldly man in his life and now brought to book. Therefore I've not filled his part with church tunes and rubbish but a good healthy full-blooded romantic remembered worldliness." Jaeger, who received the score bit by bit as each section was finished, wrote at one point: "I have not seen or heard anything since 'Parsifal' that has stirred me, & spoken to me with the trumpet tongue of genius as has this part of your latest, & by far greatest work . . . that solo of the 'Angel of the Agony' is overpowering." But he warned Elgar: "You must not, cannot expect this work of yours to be appreciated by the ordinary amateur (or critic!) after one hearing." Elgar's faith in his own powers, often vulnerable at other times in his life, was invincible now. At the end of the score he wrote: "This is the best of me . . . this I saw and knew: this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory."

But the first performance, at Birmingham on 3 October 1900 under Richter, was a disaster. The chorus, demoralized by the sudden death in May of its gifted director, took a dislike to the work and its difficulties, while the demanding title role was inadequately rendered by the aging Edward Lloyd. Without a confident presentation, *The Dream of Gerontius* failed to reach the hearts of the audience, but most of the critics did recognize its qualities. Then Julius Buths conducted it at the Lower Rhine Festival at Düsseldorf in December 1901 and again in May 1902, where it was received with acclaim by German audiences and critics. Richard Strauss declared Elgar to be "the first English progressive" who had led England back into the musical mainstream.

Praise from that quarter was enough to canonize *The Dream of Gerontius* in Britain and worldwide. It was admitted to Worcester Cathedral for the Three

Choirs Festival of 1902, though the Anglican authorities insisted on certain changes to de-emphasize the Catholic factor. Successful hearings in Manchester, Liverpool, Danzig, Darmstadt, New York, and Chicago preceded the first London performance on 6 June 1903, which was given in the newly consecrated Westminster (Roman Catholic) Cathedral, Elgar himself conducting. Anglicans and other non-Catholics overcame their suspicions, and it became a permanent fixture for British choirs, with the most eminent conductors and singers of each generation playing their parts. But today it is rarely heard in the United States. We are marking *Gerontius*'s centennial year with this performance, believed to be its Champaign-Urbana premiere. It is also offered to those attending the annual conference of the Midwest Victorian Studies Association.

The Dream of Gerontius has continuous music rather than separate numbers; the only break comes between the two Parts. Elgar reluctantly agreed to call it an oratorio, but in form it is closer to one of Wagner's music dramas. Like them, it is more concerned with inner feelings than with outward events. In the expression of these feelings Elgar's vivid orchestration plays an equal part with the several layers of voices.

## Part One

Gerontius (tenor) Assistants (chorus) Priest (bass)

The Prelude draws us into the room where Gerontius lies dying, with his friends and a priest at his bedside. It anticipates many of the main themes of the work. The first regular tune, with its repeated bass, suggests the inexorable ticking of the clock, as in Strauss's "Death and Transfiguration". Gerontius, in a tense, plaintive voice, dwells on his feelings and fears. His friends' Kyrie eleison distantly evokes the contrapuntal style of old church music, in unaccompanied semichorus; the full choir sings a more modern fugue, "Holy Mary, pray for him". Gerontius now rouses himself and prepares for death. The chorus becomes more fervent in its prayers, and Gerontius sings his great credal hymn, with its Latin refrain Sanctus fortis, over richly chromatic harmonies. Then his fears return, and the chorus reminds him of the many holy men of biblical times who were saved by God's help. Gerontius sings the poignant phrase Novissima hora est ("The last hour is come") and commits his soul to God's hands. The Priest pronounces the noble words that send Gerontius's soul on its way, in majestic music expressing a sublime confidence that transcends merely human fear or grief. The chorus repeats the passage in a yet more splendid version, then dies down, finally recalling the music of the Kyrie eleison.

#### Gerontius

Jesu. Maria—I am near to death. And thou art calling me; I know it now. Not by the token of this faltering breath. This chill at heart, this dampness on my brow.— (Jesu, have mercy! Mary, pray for me!) 'Tis this new fee! ng, never felt before. (Be with me, Lord, in my extremity!) That I am going, that I am no more. 'Tis this strange innermost abandonment. (Lover of souls! great God! I look to thee.) This emptying out of each constituent And natural force, by which I come to be. Pray, for me, O my friends; a visitant Is knocking his dire summons at my door, The like of whom, to scare me and to daunt. Has never, never come to me before. So pray for me, my friends, who have not strength to pray.

#### Assistants

Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison.
Holy Mary, pray for him.
All holy angels, pray for him.
Choirs of the righteous, pray for him.
All apostles, all evangelists, pray for him.
All holy disciples of the Lord, pray for him.
All holy innocents, pray for him.
All holy martyrs, pray for him.
All holy hermits, all holy virgins,
All ye saints of God, pray for him.

#### Gerontius

Rouse thee, my fainting soul, and play the man;
And through such waning span

Of life and thought as still has to be trod,
Prepare to meet thy God.

And while the storm of that bewilderment
Is for a season spent,

And, ere afresh the ruin on me fall,
Use well the interval.

#### Assistants

Be merciful, be gracious; spare him, Lord.
Be merciful, be gracious; Lord, deliver him.
From the sins that are past; from thy frown and thine ire;
From the perils of dying; from any complying
With sin, or denying his God, or relying
On self at the last; from the nethermost fire;
Form all that is evil; from power of the devil;
Thy servant deliver, for once and for ever.

Assistants

By thy birth, and thy cross, Rescue him from endless loss; By thy death and burial, Save him from a final fall. By thy rising from the tomb, By thy mounting up above, By the Spirit's gracious love, Save him in the day of doom.

Gerontius

Sanctus fortis, sanctus Deus, De profundis oro te, Miserere, judex meus, Parce mihi, Domine.

Firmly I believe and truly
God is three, and God is one;
And I next acknowledge duly
Manhood taken by the Son.

And I trust and hope most fully In that manhood crucified, And each thought and deed unruly Do to death, as he has died.

Simply to his grace and wholly Light and life and strength belong, And I love supremely, solely, Him the holy, him the strong.

Sanctus fortis, sanctus Deus, De profundis oro te, Miserere, judex meus, Parce mihi, Domine.

And I hold in veneration
For the love of him alone,
Holy Church, as his creation,
And her teachings, as his own.

And I take with joy whatever
Now besets me, pain or fear,
And with a strong will I sever
All the ties which bind me here.

Adoration ay be given
With and through the angelic host
To the God of earth and heaven,
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Sanctus fortis, sanctus Deus, De profundis oro te, Miserere, judex meus, Parce mihi, Domine.

#### Gerontius

I can no more; for now it comes again,
That sense of ruin, which is worse than pain,
That masterful negation and collapse
Of all that makes me man. And, crueller still,
A fierce and restless fright begins to fill
The mansion of my soul. And, worse and worse,
Some bodily form of ill
Floats on the wind, with many a loathsome curse

Floats on the wind, with many a loathsome curse Tainting the hallowed air, and laughs, and flaps Its hideous wings,

And makes me wild with horror and dismay.
O Jesu, help! Pray for me, Mary, pray!
Some angel, Jesu, such as came to thee
In thine own agony . . .

Mary, pray for me. Joseph, pray for me. Mary, pray for me.

#### **Assistants**

Rescue him, O Lord, in this his evil hour,
As of old so many by thy gracious power:
Noe, from the waters in a saving home— (Amen)
Job, from all his multiform and fell distress— (Amen)
Moses, from the land of bondage and despair— (Amen)
David, from Golia and the wrath of Saul— (Amen)
So, to show thy power,
Rescue this thy servant in his evil hour.

#### Gerontius

Novissima hora est; and I fain would sleep, The pain has wearied me . . . Into thy hands, O Lord, into thy hands . . .

### Priest and Assistants

Proficiscere, anima christiana, de hoc mundo! Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul! Go from this world! Go, in the name of God The omnipotent Father, who created thee! Go, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Son of the living God, who bled for thee! Go, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who Hath been poured out on thee! Go, in the name Of angels and archangels; in the name Of thrones and dominations; in the name Of princedoms and of powers; and in the name Of cherubim and seraphim, go forth! Go, in the name of patriarchs and prophets, And of apostles and evangelists. Of martyrs and confessors, in the name Of holy monks and hermits, in the name Of holy virgins, and all saints of God, Both men and women, go! Go on thy course; And may thy place today be found in peace. And may thy dwelling be the holy mount Of Sion; through the same, through Christ our Lord.

## Part Two

Soul of Gerontius (tenor)
Angel (mezzo-soprano)
Angel of the Agony (bass)
Demons, Angelicals, and Souls (chorus)

The beginning of Part Two, thinly scored, depicts a dreamy lightness as the Soul of Gerontius passes into a new and unfamiliar world, and he describes his experience. An Angel enters, singing a song with a lovely Alleluia refrain shared with the orchestral basses. There follows a long dialog with Gerontius, including the only duet in the work: he is anxious to enter the presence of God, and the Angel reassures him. Then come the Demons, giving Elgar his one chance for extroverted, theatrical music, and even for humor. He seized the opportunity with enthusiasm, writing "fiendishly" difficult choral parts. As the Demons fade away, muttering, it transpires that Gerontius has heard, but not seen them; will he see his God? Yes, the Angel replies, for one moment he will see God, but the sight will pierce him. (S)he goes on to tell the story of the stigmata of St. Francis.

Now we begin to hear the distant sound of angels perpetually praising God (called "Angelicals" in the poem). After another dialog, they are heard in full glory in an extended setting of the hymn, "Praise to the Holiest in the height". It reaches a tremendous, ecstatic chimax before fading away. Gerontius hears once again the friends he left on earth. The time of his judgment is nearing. The Angel of the Agony (bass) enters with an agonized motive expressing Jesus's suffering for the benefit of sinners such as Gerontius; the voices on earth implore mercy; the Angel sings a final Alleluia. The motive from the opening of the Prelude accelerates, and rises to what has been called a "blinding flash". representing the Soul's momentary vision of God. Gerontius, overcome, sings "Take me away", resigned to his coming stay in purgatory. Now the Souls in Purgatory sing part of Newman's own translation of Psalm 90 ("Lord, thou hast been our refuge"). The last scene is one of beautiful tranquillity, as the orchestra introduces a Fauré-like tune in D major, later combined with the psalm melody. The Angel bids farewell to the Soul, and blends with the Souls in Purgatory and the Angelicals' distant praise in a wonderful coda ending in a quiet, solemn Amen.

Soul of Gerontius

I went to sleep; and now I am refreshed.

A strange refreshment: for I feel in me
An inexpressive lightness, and a sense
Of freedom, as I were at length myself,
And ne'er had been before. How still it is!
I hear no more the busy beat of time,
No, nor my fluttering breath, nor struggling pulse;
Nor does one moment differ from the next.

This silence pours a solitariness
Into the very essence of my soul;
And the deep rest, so soothing and so sweet,
Hath something too of sternness and of pain.
Another marvel: someone has me fast
Within his ample palm; a uniform
And gentle pressure tells me I am not
Self-moving, but borne forward on my way.
And hark! I hear a singing: yet in sooth
I cannot of that music rightly say
Whether I hear, or touch, or taste the tones.
Oh, what a heart-subduing melody!

Angel

My work is done. My father gave This child of clay My task is o'er. In charge to me To me was given. And so I come, This child of earth To rear and train Taking it home. E'en from its birth By sorrow and pain For the crown is won, To serve and save, In the narrow way, Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. For evermore. And saved is he. From earth to heaven

Soul

It is a member of that family
Of wondrous beings, who, ere the world were made,
Millions of ages back, have stood around
The throne of God. . . .
I will address him. Mighty one, my lord,
My guardian spirit, all hail!

Angel

All hail, my child! My child and brother, hail! What wouldest thou?

Soul

I would have nothing but to speak with thee For speaking's sake. I wish to hold with thee Conscious communion; though I fain would know A maze of things, were it but meet to ask, And not a curiousness.

Angel

You cannot now Cherish a wish which ought not to be wished.

Soul

Then I will speak. I ever have believed
That on the moment when the struggling soul
Quitted its mortal case, forthwith it fell
Under the awful presence of its God,
There to be judged and sent to its own place.
What lets [hinders] me now from going to my Lord?

Angel

Thou art not let; but with extremest speed Art hurrying to the just and holy judge.

Soul

Dear angel, say,

Why have I now no fear of meeting him? Along my earthly life, the thought of death And judgment was to me most terrible.

Angel

It is because

Then thou didst fear, that now thou dost not fear.
Thou hast forestalled the agony, and so
For thee the bitterness of death is past.
Also, because already in thy soul
The judgment is begun.

Angel

A presage falls upon thee, as a ray Straight from the judge, expressive of thy lot. That calm and joy uprising in thy soul Is first-fruit to thee of thy recompense, And heaven begun.

Soul

Now that the hour is come, my fear is fled; And at this balance of my destiny, Now close upon me, I can forward look With a serenest joy.

Soul

But hark! upon my sense Comes a fierce hubbub, which would make me fear, Could I be frighted.

Angel

We are now arrived
Close on the judgment-court: that sullen howl
Is from the demons who assemble there,
Hungry and wild, to claim their property,
And gather souls for hell. Hist to their cry!

Soul

How sour and how uncouth a dissonance!

Demons

Low-born clods of brute earth,
They aspire to become gods
By a new birth, and an extra grace,
And a score of merits, as if aught
Could stand in place of the high thought,
And the glance of fire of the great spirits,
The powers blest, the lords by right,
The primal owners

The primal owners
Of the proud dwelling, and realm of light.

Dispossessed, aside thrust, Chucked down by the sheer might Of a despot's will, of a tyrant's frown, Who after expelling their hosts, gave, Triumphant still, and still unjust, Each forfeit crown to psaum-droners, And canting groaners, to every slave And pious cheat, and crawling knave, Who licked the dust under his feet.

Angel

It is the restless panting of their being, Like beasts of prey, who, caged within their bars, In a deep hideous purring have their life, And an incessant pacing to and fro.

**Demons** 

The mind bold and independent,
The purpose free, so we are told,
Must not think to have the ascendant.
What's a saint? One whose breath
Doth the air taint before his death.
Ha! A bundle of bones,
Which fools adore when life is o'er.
Ha! ha!

Virtue and vice, a knave's pretence.
'Tis all the same; dread of hell-fire,
Of the venomous flame, a coward's plea.
Give him his price, saint though he be.
From shrewd good sense he'll slave for hire,
And does but aspire to the heaven above
With sordid aim, and not from love.
Ha! ha!

Soul

I see not those false spirits. Shall I see My dearest Master, when I reach his throne?

Angel

Yes,—for one moment thou shalt see thy Lord. One moment; but thou knowest not, my child, What thou dost ask: that sight of the Most Fair Will gladden thee, but it will pierce thee too.

Soul

Thou speakest darkly, angel! and an awe Falls on me, and a fear lest I be rash.

Angel

There was a mortal, who is now above In the mid glory. He, when near to die, Was given communion with the Crucified,—Such, that the Master's very wounds were stamped Upon his flesh; and, from the agony Which thrilled through body and soul in that embrace, Learn that the fame of the everlasting love Doth burn ere it transform. . . . Hark to those sounds! They come of tender beings angelical, Least and most childlike of the songs of God.

Choir of Angelicals

Praise to the Holiest in the height, And in the depth be praise: In all his words most wonderful; Most sure in all his ways!

To us his elder race he gave
To battle and to win,
Without the chastisement of pain,
Without the soil of sin.

The younger son he willed to be A marvel in his birth: Spirit and flesh his parents were: His home was heaven and earth.

The eternal blessed his child, and armed, And sent him hence afar, To serve as champion in the field Of elemental war,

To be his viceroy in the world
Of matter, and of sense;
Upon the frontier, towards the foe,
A resolute defence.

Angel

We now have passed the gate, and are within The house of judgment.

Soul

The sound is like the rushing of the wind— The summer wind—among the lofty pines.

Choir of Angelicals

Glory to him, who evermore
By truth and justice reigns;
Who tears the soul from out its case,
And burns away its stains!

Angel

They sing of thy approaching agony, Which thou so eagerly didst question of.

Soul

My soul is in my hand: I have no fear. But hark! a grand mysterious harmony: It floods me, like the deep and solemn sound Of many waters.

Angel

And now the threshold, as we traverse it, Utters aloud its glad responsive chant. Choir of Angelicals

Praise to the Holiest in the height, And in the depth be praise: In all his words most wonderful Most sure in all his ways!

O loving wisdom of our God! When all was sin and shame, A second Adam to the fight And to the rescue came.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood, Which did in Adam fail, Should strive afresh against the foe, Should strive, and should prevail,

And that a higher gift than grace Should flesh and blodd refine, God's presence and his very self And essence all divine.

O generous love! that he who smote In man for man the foe, The double agony in man For man should undergo,

And in the garden secretly,
And on the cross on high,
Should teach his brethren and inspire
To suiffer and to die.

Angel

Thy judgment now is near, for we are come Into the veiled presence of our God.

Soul

I hear the voices that I left on earth.

Angel

It is the voice of friends around thy bed,
Who say the "Subvenite" with the priest.
Hither the echoes come; before the throne
Stands the great Angel of the Agony,
The same who strengthened him, what time he knelt
Lone in the garden shade, bedewed with blood.
That angel best can plead with him for all
Tormented souls, the dying and the dead.

Angel of the Agony

Jesu! by that shuddering dread which fell on thee; Jesu! by that cold dismay which sickened thee; Jesu! by that pang of heart which thrilled in thee; Jesu! by that mount of sins which crippled thee; Jesu! by that sense of guilt which stifled thee; Jesu! by that innocence which girdled thee; Jesu! by that sanctity which reigned in thee; Jesu! by that Godhead which was one with thee; Jesu! spare these souls which are so dear to thee, Souls who in prison, calm and patient, wait for thee; Hasten, Lord, their hour, and bid them come to thee To that glorious home, where they shall ever gaze on thee.

Soul

I go before my judge . . .

Voices on Earth

Be merciful, be gracious; spare him, Lord. Be merciful, be gracious; Lord, deliver him.

Angel

Praise to his name!
O happy, suffering soul! for it is safe,
Consumed, yet quickened, by the glance of God.
Alleluia! Praise to his name!

[Here the Soul has his momentary vision of God.]

Soul

Take me away, and in the lowest deep
There let me be,
And there in hope the lone night-watches keep,
Told out for me.
There, motionless and happy in my pain,
Lone, not forlorn,
There will I sing my sad perpetual strain,

Until the morn.

There will I sing, and soothe my stricken breast,
Which ne'er can cease

To throb, and pine, and languish, till possessed Of its sole peace.

There will I sing my absent Lord and Love. Take me away, That sooner I may rise, and go above, And see him in the truth of everlasting day.

Souls in Purgatory

Lord, thou hast been our refuge:
in every generation.

Before the hills were born, and the world was:
from age to age thou art God.

Bring us not, Lord, very low:
for thou hast said, come back again, ye sons of Adam.

Come back, O Lord! how long:
and be entreated for thy servants.

Angel

Softly and gently, dearly-ransomed soul, In my most loving arms I now enfold thee, And o'er the penal waters, as they roll, I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee, And carefully I dip thee in the lake,
And thou, without a sob or a resistance,
Dost through the flood thy rapid passage take,
Sinking deep, deeper, into the dim distance.

Angels, to whom the willing task is given,
Shall tend, and nurse, and lull thee, as thou liest;
And masses on the earth, and prayers in heaven,
Shall aid thee at the throne of the Most Highest.

Farewell; but not for ever! Brother dear,
Be brave and patient on thy bed of sorrow;
Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here,
And I will come and wake thee on the morrow.

Souls

Lord, thou hast been our refuge, etc. Amen.

**Angelicals** 

Praise to the holiest in the height, etc. Amen.