THREE SPIRES CONCERT REVIEW: ELGAR’S DREAM OF GERONTIUS

November’s offering from the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra, Elgar’s The Dream of Gerontius, was - being penned in 1900 - a follow-on by a whisker from last July’s all-20th century programme.

Elgar’s is a lengthy opus in two parts, depicting the protagonist, Gerontius, before and after his passing, aided into that great unknown by a priest and his attendants, and led beyond the curtain by a dedicated Guardian Angel.

The orchestral opening, sombre strings tinged with oboe and bassoon, introduces Gerontius on his deathbed awaiting the inevitable with both trepidation and awe.

Tenor soloist Michael Bell balanced the emotional turmoil convincingly, with a crisp, but never shrill delivery that tugged at the heart strings while steering clear of theatricality. His performance rather called to mind that of Richard Lewis in the classic recording with Dame Janet Baker under Barbirolli.

As the assistants pray for his soul, the choir makes its first ethereal entry, another sensitively delivered passage. Tensions build as Gerontius feels himself moving closer to his final breaths, the choir ever more exclamatory in their reassurances and invocations for deliverance, until, exhausted, the soloist resigns himself with the words ‘Into Thy hands, O Lord’ as the priest intones ‘Proficiscere, anima Christiana, de hoc mundo! (depart, Christian soul, from this world).

For all the musical preparation leading up to this dramatic moment, baritone Armand Rabot’s entry here was, to this reviewer, a trifle overwhelming, with a volume that rocked the very foundations of the cathedral. One might muse that Gerontius would have been scared witless across the threshold were he not already well on his way. If nothing else, the moment felt dynamically and stylistically at odds with the rest of the performance.

Part Two picks up the story after the hero’s death (though the ‘Dream’ in the title permits an alternative interpretation of the text). A sensitive string opening leads to an extended recitative between Gerontius and his newly arrived Guardian Angel (the young Mezzo-Soprano Frances Gregory). This section of the piece can easily drag, lacking the variety and dynamism of Part One. Though she sang with confidence and held her audience well, her interpretation and approach to vibrato would have benefited from more light and shade.

The lengthy dialogue does in due course pass back to the choir, now re-cast as demons taunting and tempting Gerontius on his journey to meet his maker. Cardinal Newman’s text throws out some pretty powerful and terrifying imagery here, and while Elgar’s language by the turn of century could easily handle the turbulent weather of his Sea Pictures or the antics of an overzealous dog in the Enigma Variations, visions of hellfire and eternal suffering do seem to overstretch his powers. Both conductor (James Anderson-Besant) and performers did their very best with the frenetic choral part-writing and wild orchestral stabs, but the resultant sound remained cluttered and unclear, not helped by the cathedral’s highly reverberant acoustic. Clarity was duly restored when the chorus donned its new mantle as the Choir of Angelicals.

The closing half of Part Two is a chance to reset the mood into uplifting affirmations of divine glory and eternal rest, with the added genius of a brief intrusion from earthly voices around the deathbed (perhaps reinforcing that alternative reading), serenely captured by hushed chorus and organ before rising brass chords and organ pedals climax with a single cymbal crash at the briefest glimpse of the Almighty.

Tenor and choir remained on top form through these closing passages as Gerontius is helped through to has final repose and the souls in purgatory and the Choir of Angelicals sublimate themselves with a closing Amen. Regardless of one’s religious leanings, one cannot help but be moved by the final pages of this piece and the more so by the impassioned performance from the whole ensemble here.

The Three Spires Singers and Orchestra return to Truro Cathedral on 5th April 2025 to get you in true Easter spirit with Bach’s St Matthew Passion. This will be followed in July by one of Rachmaninov’s finest, most powerful compositions: his All-Night Vigil (which, for anyone who is unsure, is not an all-nighter but lasts about an hour). Two concerts for the diary definitely not to be missed.

Chris Best 07/12/24

Chris Best is a Cornwall based composer and writer. More information can be found at [www.chrisbestmusic.com](http://www.chrisbestmusic.com)