

17 April 1977

**Royal
Tunbridge
Wells
Choral
Society**

MENDELSSOHN

Elijah

1976-1977

ELGAR

GERONTIUS

The Dream of Gerontias

a poem by
CARDINAL NEWMAN

set to music by
EDWARD ELGAR

Kenneth Bowen *tenor*
Grace Dives *mezzo-soprano*
Peter Knapp *baritone*

The Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society

Full Orchestra
(Leader: Penelope Howard)

conducted by
DEREK WATMOUGH

Assembly Hall
Royal Tunbridge Wells
SUNDAY 17th APRIL 1977 at 3 p.m.

The Artists

Conductor and Musical Director

DEREK WATMOUGH

Musical Director of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society, was educated in Yorkshire and showed his musical ability at an early age as a violinist in the National Youth Orchestra. Later he gained a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Music and although he still plays the violin, the piano is now the instrument of his choice.

As well as performing and conducting, Derek Watmough is also a composer and music critic. The high standards of the Society reflect his outstanding musicianship and capacity for hard work.

Apart from his public engagements, he is musical director of the Beacon School at Crowborough.

KENNETH BOWEN

Kenneth Bowen, a Welsh-born tenor sings 'Gerontius' this afternoon. Early in his career he won the Queen's Prize, together with the first prize in the Munich International Competition and has since been one of Britain's leading singers.

He has sung with all the major orchestras and choral societies and has made appearances at the Promenade Concerts. His engagements have taken him all over Europe as well as Scandanavia and the U.S.A.

Of particular interest to us this afternoon is that Kenneth Bowen is widely known for his interpretation of the title rôle in Elgar's 'Dream of Gerontius'.

He has appeared in operatic roles at Sadler's Wells, with the Glyndebourne Touring Company and at Covent Garden. More recently he sang in Stockholm, a performance of Tippett's 'A Child of our Time', conducted by the composer himself.



GRACE DIVES

Grace Dives began her singing career early in her university days and served a full and varied apprenticeship in many facets of theatre and professional choral and opera engagements. She enjoys the challenge of both the extended vocal range required of a mezzo-soprano and the variety of the repertoire in oratorio and opera for this voice.

Grace Dives sings in many languages, including Russian and has sung with the Kent Opera; at Leighton House, London, and at the Wigmore Hall. Miss Dives has a wide repertoire of operatic and oratorio roles and has been widely applauded for her performances.

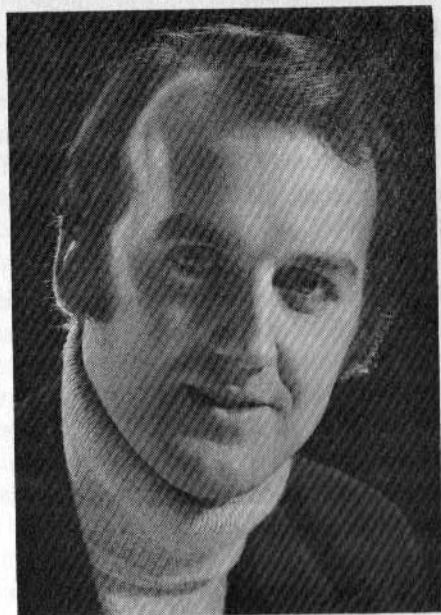


PETER KNAPP

Our baritone this afternoon comes from St Albans where he began his musical life as a cathedral chorister. Later he won a choral scholarship to St John's College Cambridge. Afterwards he spent a short time with the Welsh National Opera Company before going to Italy to study with Tito Gobbi.

His later success in the National Federation of Music Societies Competition in 1972 led to engagements in concerts and recitals throughout the country and at Glyndebourne, where, after a season, he began singing major roles with the Touring Company.

Since 1975, Peter Knapp has been increasingly active in operatic roles and has appeared in operas by Monteverdi, Cavalli and Mozart.





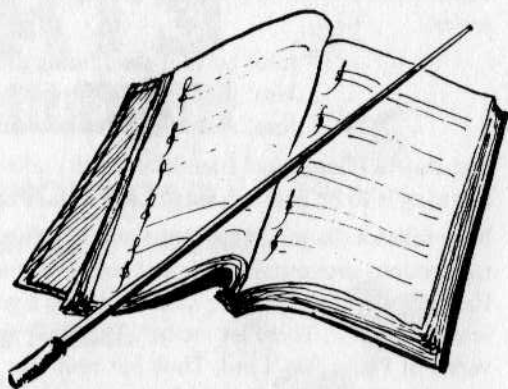
GERONTIUS
– The Idea

Cardinal Newman's poem *The Dream of Gerontius* could well have been sub-titled 'A Vision of Death and Judgment', since this is what it is fact about. Newman jotted it down in odd moments and on rather small pieces of paper – including used envelopes – in 1865 following a period of illness and spiritual desolation. Published shortly afterwards in a monthly journal over the famous initials 'J.H.N.', its compelling mixture of vivid imagination and solid patristic theology made an immediate impression on the Victorian reading public.

The poem had haunted Elgar for many years until, in 1900, the moment arrived and he produced his musical setting, after a summer of very hard work, in response to a commission from the Birmingham Festival. (He actually set about two-thirds of the poem, selecting and editing with a taste and judgment which have been insufficiently acknowledged.) 'This is the best of me', he wrote at the beginning of the manuscript score, conscious that he had given a masterpiece to the world.

The first performance was, however, disastrous. Inadequate soloists and an under-rehearsed choir made a dismal hash of what appeared at the time to be difficult music in an unfamiliar idiom. Almost crushed by disappointment and bitterness, Elgar wrote to a friend: 'I have allowed my heart to open once – it is now shut against every religious feeling and every soft, gentle impulse *for ever*'. He could not, of course, have foreseen that Richter (the conductor at Birmingham) would take the work back to his native Germany and produce it with striking success during the following year, and that within a short time 'Gerontius' would be acclaimed everywhere for what it is: a work of amazing power and originality, combining intensely personal utterance with absolute fidelity to the spirit of Newman's poem; a work which would continue to be loved and performed – as it has been – for three-quarters of a century.

GERONTIUS
– The Performance



The overture is built on motifs which recur throughout the work, and ends quietly as Gerontius begins to meditate on his approaching death. But this is no gentle good-night, no sentimental Victorian death-bed scene. Gerontius is troubled by doubt and horror and by a frightening visitant 'knocking his dire summons' at the door. He begs his friends to pray for him, and the semi-chorus enters with 'Kyrie eleison' (Lord, have mercy). The main choir joins in with invocation of the saints and martyrs. With a short-lived return of strength, Gerontius admonishes himself: 'Rouse thee, my fainting soul, and play the man' and makes an affirmation of faith: 'Firmly I believe and truly' (now a well-known hymn). But soon he is again overwhelmed by a 'sense of ruin, which is worse than pain' and by visions of evil which make him 'wild with horror and dismay'. 'Rescue him, O Lord, in this evil hour', the chorus urgently pleads. Gerontius utters his last words on earth: 'Into Thy hands, O Lord'; the Priest (bass) enters dramatically with the Prayer for the Dying: 'Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul!' and the chorus leaps to a blazing B flat major chord with 'Go, in the name of Angels and Archangels'. They are joined by the semi-chorus, and the two choirs and bass soloist combine in an impressive ending to the first part of the work.

Part II opens with a subdued but magical orchestral introduction pointing the words 'How still it is!' which Gerontius sings as his soul is borne forward towards the Just and Holy Judge. He is joined by his Guardian Angel (mezzo-soprano) and a richly theological dialogue ensues, interrupted before long by a chorus of Demons, snarling with impotent malice in a devilish double fugue. As their 'sour and uncouth dissonance' dies away, Gerontius questions eagerly: 'Shall I see my dearest Master when I reach His throne?' He is warned by the Angel that 'the flame of the Everlasting Love doth burn ere it transform'.

The distant chorus of 'Angelicals' is now heard for the first time; and the music mounts in excitement as the Angel sings 'We now have passed the gate and are within the House of Judgment'. As they reach the threshold, the full chorus enters in massive seven-part

harmony: 'Praise to the Holiest in the height' – the beginning of an extended and magnificently laid out choral sequence. When this is over, the Angel tells Gerontius: 'Thy judgment now is near'. The bass soloist, impersonating the angel who comforted Christ in Gethsemane, makes an impassioned plea in intensely chromatic descending scales:

'Jesu! by that shuddering dread which fell on Thee;
Jesu! by that cold dismay which sickened Thee . . .
Jesu! spare these souls which are so dear to Thee'.

The chorus (Gerontius' friends on earth) take up the plea for mercy; and the Angel, knowing it to be granted, sings a few bars of rapturous thanksgiving.

Now follows the judgment scene which is the climax of the whole work. After a tremendous orchestral build-up, Gerontius, pierced by a brief glimpse of the Most Fair and, in effect, judging himself, utters a great cry: 'Take me away, and in the lowest deep . . . There let me be'. The choir sings in the quietest whisper the opening verses of Psalm 90: 'Lord, Thou has been our refuge in every generation', after which a most beautiful relaxed melody is announced by the orchestra. This is taken up by the Angel, who sings farewell to Gerontius and leaves him suffering happily in purgatory as the chorus brings the work to a quiet, serene close.

**Alpine
Rose**



**Chalet
Arosa**



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As you see from the leaflets in the hall, an appeal has been launched to secure the future of Elgar's birthplace. After the conclusion of today's concert you will find collectors stationed at the exits. We earnestly ask you to be as generous as possible in your support and all contributions will be forwarded to the Elgar Foundation. These days it seems as if everyone is appealing for some good cause or other but we feel that those who love the music of Elgar will wish to be associated with this Appeal. The Society thought that this performance of 'Gerontius' would serve as a fitting occasion to make this known to you. Thank You.

ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS CHORAL SOCIETY

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