

# Oratorio singers impress

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IT IS one of the sad ironies of Elgar's career that in his determination to enhance the great oratorio tradition in this country, he took it up a blind alley and left it there to die.

After *The Dream of Gerontius*, which itself won recognition only very slowly, he embarked on a grandiose trilogy dealing with the foundation of the Christian church and its mission in the world.

In the event, *The Kingdom* turned out to be the last of the great oratorios. A rare opportunity of hearing the work was given to a Tunbridge Wells audience on Sunday in an impressive performance by the Tunbridge Wells Choral Society, conducted by Derek Watmough, in the Assembly Hall.

It was a courageous choice, for Elgar presents many challenges. First there is the lack of popular appeal (due, possibly, to what some might regard as an excess of Victorian religiosity), all too clearly confirmed by a comparatively poor attendance.

Secondly, there are the formidable demands imposed on chorus and soloists alike.

Lastly, there is the heavy orchestral scoring in which Elgar often seems to be reaching out towards the symphonies that were to follow.

The chorus also excelled in the difficult choral fugue in the central section *Pentecost*, one of many passages which, despite the problems of balance they present, reveal the power of *The Kingdom* and the true quality of Elgar's inspiration.

Quite outstanding among the soloists, or indeed in any other company, was the baritone Anthony Michaels-Moore, who sang most beautifully the demanding role of Peter. With him on the platform were Jennifer Offord (soprano), Elizabeth Castle (contralto) and Neville Williams (tenor).

**Robert Hardcastle**