

The Dream of Gerontius

Of all the great English oratorios, one of the most unusual is surely Elgar's mighty *The Dream of Gerontius*, the subject of the collaborative concert between Bracknell and Crowthorne Choral Societies that took place on the evening of Sunday 17 March at Reading's Concert Hall. No simple telling of an Old Testament tale or of the life of Christ, it instead charts the final journey of a man's soul as it comes before the seat of judgement. One senses a fervent engagement between the catholic Elgar and the visionary poetry of Cardinal Newman, the music embracing the turmoil of the narrative with sweeping passion and eloquence while drawing on a diverse range of styles. Indeed, written in 1900, it was one of the pieces that first brought Elgar to prominence.

Any performance requires a dramatic interaction between chorus, soloists and orchestra, and all elements were here strongly presented. Of the solo singers, the baritone of Marcus Farnsworth blazed most powerfully, rich in authority and intense of diction, and particularly striking when singing from the balcony during the first half. James Oxley, singing Gerontius, possesses a voice very much in the lyric English tenor tradition, clean, clear and attractive. He presented the music from memory as if an opera, although the anguish of the role is more commonly characterised by a more vibrant vocal style. The mezzo-soprano Martha McLorinan brought a striking intensity to the role of the Angel.

The chorus takes on a number of different roles in the work and is certainly put through its paces by Elgar's demanding choral writing, even if more of the work is in fact devoted to the soloists. The results here were impressive throughout, although practicalities did not always work in the singers' favour. Positioned centre stage immediately behind the excellent Senesino Players, the Scholars Choir of Wellington College had the easiest time of it, while sight-lines and, no doubt acoustics, were far more challenging for the massed forces of the two choral societies ranging upwards on either side of the organ. This did not always make ensemble easy to control but the chorus rose to the challenges of the work with great conviction, cackling with relish as demons while employing a moving tenderness in the more intimate moments. But at least part of the success of any performance of *Gerontius* depends on the potentially spine-tingling chorus 'Praise to the Holiest', in which Elgar is heard at his most intensely emotional and lyrical, and the results here did not disappoint. With the orchestra filling the hall with thrilling tone, the massed voices were brought to a moving climax by the conductor Simon Williamson, Crowthorne Choral Society's musical director, before the souls in purgatory and the angelicals closed the work in heartfelt and tender fashion. Altogether a memorable evening of music-making.

Stephen Willis