

Bedford Choral Society

April 14th and 15th 2012

Elgar- 'The Dream of Gerontius'

Dear Sirs,

Here is the review I was asked to write. Please use it as you wish and I hope it will be useful. Needless to say, I greatly enjoyed the concert on Saturday.

Yours faithfully,
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The Dream of Gerontius is a difficult work to execute and, famously, the first performance in Birmingham, the conductor Hans Richter notwithstanding, was a disaster. Not so Bedford Choral Society's masterly performance on Saturday 14th April.

In Part I, the tenor Mark Wilde, expressed the anguish and fear of Gerontius as he approaches his death with the chorus entering the performance with firm assurance in the plea to *Rescue him*. The Bedfordshire Youth Orchestra from the beginning did fine justice to Elgar's masterly orchestration, their playing of the prologue showing fine phrasing, pulse and sweeping dynamics as though a living organism, Elgar himself saying of the work: "if you cut my music it would bleed." The grand melody (cantabile e largamente) at the climax of the Prologue was secure and expressive; a tribute to the orchestra's playing together to pleasing effect. Mark Wilde was bold in the assertion of Gerontius' faith in *Sanctus fortis* with the orchestra deftly playing the chromatic accompaniment to Gerontius with Mr Wilde expressing the anguish in the words: *in thine own agony*.

Timothy Dawkins was authoritative as the priest as Gerontius is sent on his way in the last rites with the words *Proficiscere, anima Christiana* leading to a gloriously full sound from the chorus: *Go in the name of angels and archangels...*

Part II saw the orchestra expressing the peace Gerontius feels after his death. The orchestra allowed us to share the "strange refreshment" Gerontius experiences; they approached their playing here with appropriate lightness. (Has anyone else noticed the anticipation of the Violin Concerto in the orchestral writing at the words "*..whether I hear, or touch, or taste the tones?*") There was deft contrast between intended timelessness of this section with the beating of time running out marked by the strings as Gerontius sings *through each waning span of life* in Part I; *no more the busy beat of time* was expressed admirably by the mezzo and the tenor as well as the

orchestra. Jeanette Ager (mezzo) as the Angel was magical. Elgar at one stage thought this section weaker than the rest; but, no, we were carried forward as Gerontius hastens towards his judgement. One felt her warm support. Gerontius here has an attitude of innocence expressed in childlike questions movingly articulated by Mark Wilde.

The Demons' chorus with its fugue was sung in masterly fashion by the chorus. The awesome orchestral accompaniment was also superb with secure syncopations. It was this section which was particularly weak in the 1900 performance but the Bedford Choral Society were suitable menacing in their sneering deriding of faith. I think the Choral Society enjoyed their diablerie, and great it sounded. I should mention the percussion here who added spice to this section; as, indeed, they did to the whole performance.

As we approached the judgement seat with Gerontius, the orchestra maintained the tension with beautiful phrasing; this orchestra understood the music as conversations with some of the players afterwards confirmed. The chorus also excelled themselves in the great chorus *praise to the holiest in the height*. The horns in the youth orchestra need a special mention here as they are particularly exposed in some of the writing of this section which more than made up for an uncertain entry earlier on. The great climactic crash as Gerontius is judged was really dramatic and entirely correctly played. Well done, the percussion again!

The end was really pleasing with all sections of the band producing a lovely sound- effective string playing here. Again, the chorus sang showing they understood the music and import of Cardinal Newman's words. The soloist, chorus and orchestra blended superbly in this complex section where much is going on.

Real praise for this performance is owing to the conductor, Michael Rose. He held together the large forces in this work to excellent effect bringing out the wonderful phrasing which helps bring out this work's emotional intensity. A great deal of work has gone into this production and having been to all their concerts in recent years, I feel the members of the Bedford Choral Society were at their best yet. Well done to everybody for having the ambition to bring this memorable performance to fruition.