



THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS IN CHELMSFORD CATHEDRAL, 9th JULY 2011

Elgar's masterwork 'The Dream of Gerontius' is one man's musical journey from this world to the next joined by a vast company of interested parties, that include Assistants, Demons, Angelicals and Souls in Purgatory. It is, in a tradition more usually associated with opera, an intimate epic. It was, under the guidance of Alexander Chaplin, an epic cast of talents that filled to overflowing Chelmsford Cathedral last Saturday to begin that journey: Harlow Chorus, East London Chorus, the Salomon Orchestra and three fine soloists Catherine King mezzo - soprano, Mark Wilde tenor and Edward Grint baritone.

The work begins as it will end 'softly and gently' with the hushed entry of the orchestral prelude. A growling intensity underpinned by fine percussion builds the expectation of what is to follow. Gerontius begins with the line "Jesu Mary - I am near to death". Mark Wilde has a full rich tenor sound that can match the extreme demands of 'Gerontius', tender and touching in fear and able to hold his own against the combined forces of two choirs when in ecstasy. Throughout the performance he was totally convincing in his delivery of the text reflecting the poetry and the passion with a Verdi like lyricism. He carried the burden of the title role magnificently.

The first choral entry was commanding and confident matching perfectly in tone and weight the memory of the orchestral prelude. Warm coaxing sound waves plead mercy on behalf of the dying Gerontius. Again there is a moment when we feel the loss that Elgar never tackled opera, with the wonderful refrain that creates the next stand out moment, as Gerontius begins 'Sanctus fortis, Sanctus Deus, De profundis oro te'. An out and out aria follows, ending with the cry 'O Jesu, help! Pray for me'

As the first part draws to its sublime conclusion, the Priest enters urging the soul of Gerontius to 'Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul! 'This is the first of two short contributions from the baritone Edward Grint, who filled the Cathedral with his full rich sound. Supported by the pulsing choral aura of the Assistants the interval arrives with a stunning moment when the choir dies away to allow the soloist to rise through and let the text tell its story.

Part two, now with the Soul of Gerontius, ushers in the Angel, here sung by a radiant Catherine King. It would be hard to imagine a more satisfying Angel than Catherine. The voice is superb and her sense of theatre is evident in the shading she achieved with the changing burden of her message to Gerontius as she ushers him into the House Of Judgement. The wonderful 'Praise to the Holiest in the height' prayer from the Choir of Angelicals was here sung with power, clarity and ringing waves of 'generous love'. Mark Wilde has his finest moment living the text as he commits himself finally with 'Take me away'.

The Dream is a wonderful masterpiece of English music, full of magical and unforgettable moments. Under the certain and loving guidance of Alexander Chaplin it was brought to those of us present on Saturday, fresh minted, and deeply affecting in its sincerity. Both choirs and the three soloists were all at their best for this wonderful performance, while the Salomon Orchestra gave the evening a full Majesty, articulating every colour in the orchestration and providing real power when it was called for.

David Batterbee 10 July 2011