

Theology applied to music: *The Dream of Gerontius* revisited

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The theme of Cardinal John Henry Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius* is the Roman Catholic theology of death and the redemption of a sinner. It is a respectable piece of writing in poetical language, numerous reprinted and translated in French and German. It formed the basis of Edward Elgar's libretto and music bearing the same title as Newman's work.¹ The scope of this article is to explore the relationship of Elgar's to Newman's vision as interpreted in his libretto and choral composition. The article concludes by placing Newman's work in the context of the history of musicology.

On becoming a new man

Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius* was the subject of an essay published in the *Elgar Society Journal*.² *The Dream of Gerontius* 'was written by accident – and it was published by accident'.³ Vélez argues that Newman's (1801-1890) personal history indicates otherwise:

... it was the fruit of many years of agonizing study and prayer leading him to the Roman Catholic Church.⁴

Newman wrote it two decades prior to his conversion to Catholicism; it was first published in two parts, in May and June 1865, in the Jesuit magazine *The Month*.⁵ An overtly Catholic theological poem of eschatological significance, this work is aptly described as a Goethe's 'Spiritualised Faust'. In *The Dream of Gerontius* Newman ...

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- 1 Edward Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius: The Libretto*, accessed on 10 December 2015, <http://www.elgar.org/3gerontl.htm>.
 - 2 Ian Ker, 'Newman and *The Dream of Gerontius*', *Elgar Society Journal*, Vol.17, No.2 (August 2011), 30-32.
 - 3 John Henry Newman, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. Charles S. Dessain *et al.*, Vols.11-22 (London: Thames Nelson & Sons, 1961-72), Letter to Lady Charles Thynne (29 October 1865), 22:86.
 - 4 Juan R. Vélez, 'Newman's Theology in the Dream of Gerontius', *New Blackfriars*, 82, No. 967 (2001), 387-398. The poem is divided into seven 'phases': (i) Gerontius, (ii) Soul of Gerontius, (iii) Soul, (iv) Soul, (v) no title, (vi) Angel, and (vii) Angel.
 - 5 Stephen Banfield, 'The Dream of Gerontius at 100: Elgar's Other Opera?', *The Musical Times*, 141, no. 1873 (Winter 2000), 23-31.

... reached a refined doctrinal and spiritual understanding of the Christian belief in life after death. In effect he had overcome various problems and interpretations of Calvinist and Anglican theology, and of Roman Catholic piety.⁶

It was not offensive to the Anglicans except for some doctrinal notion of the purgatory which they found repugnant. The poem is about the journey of the soul of Gerontius, the pious dying old man, to judgment by God, a meditation of afterlife. It recalls the allegorical depiction of the journey through the metaphysical territory of the death, a recollection of the medieval epic poem *Divina Commedia* by Dante Alighieri (c.1265-1321). Vélez compared Newman's work with another eschatological poem by Ettore Vernazza (c.1470-1524) entitled the *Tratatto*, commonly referred to as *Purgation and Purgatory*, a work inspired by St Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510).⁷ Vélez notes similarities and differences between *The Dream of Gerontius* and *Purgation and Purgatory*. Both poems ...

develop a rich notion of purgatory as a spiritual purification of the soul. For them purgatory is a condition in which the soul experiences great sorrow for past sins, mixed with great joy because it is assured of its salvation.⁸

Whilst the theme in the former is individual judgment, the theme in the latter is purgatory. Vélez further argues that the reading of one poem ...

... enriches the other, and both contribute to a more complete biblical, theological and spiritual understanding of the doctrine of purgatory as a purification of the soul for the definitive union with God its maker and redeemer. Although both poems deal exclusively with personal eschatology, the authors convey the unity between Christian eschatology, creation and Christology. They recall mankind's original holiness, subsequent fall and redemption through the Incarnation and passion of Jesus Christ.⁹

A former academic at Oxford and an Anglican priest, Newman was a main exponent of the Oxford Movement.¹⁰ In 1845, he left the Church of England for that of Rome. He relinquished his teaching post at Oxford and became a priest in the Roman Catholic Church, a move which caused significant bitter and divisive controversial religious stir in the Victorian era. Newman was actively involved in founding University College Dublin, at the time known as the Catholic University of Ireland, of which he became its first Rector:

6 Vélez, *op. cit.*, 389

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, 392-3.

9 *Ibid.*, 395.

10 See Brian Martin, *John Henry Newman: his life and work* (London and New York: Continuum, 1982). This text is a critical biography of the Newman from his academic career at Oxford to the highest college of the Roman Catholic Church. His writings, themes which were central to the controversies facing Christianity in the nineteenth century, are exposed in the socio-religious setting in which they were put forward. For a selection of his non-autobiographical writings (which include *The Dream of Gerontius*) and model sermons see John Henry Newman, *Selected Sermons, Prayers, Verses, and Devotions*, ed. John Thornton and Susan Varenne (New York: Vintage, 1999). This book, with an introduction by Peter Gomes, was a highly recommended text when it was issued (Christian, *op.cit.*).

Long celebrated as a spiritual writer and autobiographer, and certainly among the most famous modern converts to Catholicism, Newman is news that has stayed news.¹¹

The Master of the King's Musick

Edward Elgar (1857-1934), the leading British composer of the earlier part of the twentieth century, was moved by Newman's poem. His choral work remains his masterpiece:

... *The Dream of Gerontius*, a powerfully dramatic setting for soloists, chorus, and orchestra of a poem by Cardinal Newman that tells the story of a dying man's encounter with God.¹²

Although the website page of the University of Birmingham states proudly that ...

The Department of Music is one of the most distinguished in the UK, with a history stretching back to 1905 when Edward Elgar was appointed the University's first Professor of Music,¹³

Elgar was considered at that time as an outsider not only in music circles, mainly composed of academics, but also in social ones. Although self-taught, he was appointed to the post once the Music Department was set up;

The English musical establishment was dominated by 'gentleman composers' with university degrees who taught on the conservatory level.¹⁴

He resigned from the chair three years later. He hated teaching and, throughout his life, he was an 'outsider in English society'. In his commentary on Elgar, the music and drama critic of the *Wall Street Journal* Terry Teachout notes that ...

... he was also born Catholic at a time when Protestant bigotry, though considerably diminished, remained a significant force in English social life.¹⁵

In spite of this socio-religious context, Elgar was respected by the British Monarch. He was appointed 'Master of the King's Musick and the Musician Laureate of the British people'¹⁶ in 1924, a post he retained until his death in 1934. The respect that he enjoyed in the royal court is evident in the opinion of King George V and his advisors who were reported to have stated that 'if the post is to go to the most eminent musician it would hardly be possible to go beyond Elgar.'¹⁷

11 Graham Christian, 'Selected Sermons, Prayers, Verses and Devotions', *Library Journal*, 124, no. 12 (July 1999), 99.

12 Terry Teachout, 'Unloved Elgar', *Commentary* 118, no. 1 (Jul/Aug 2004): 42-45, 43, accessed on 8 December 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/ejournals.um.edu/mt/docview/195873435/fulltextPDF/750837E43D094956PQ/1?accountid=27934>.

13 Accessed on 15 December 2015, <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/lcahm/departments/music/index.aspx>

14 Teachout, *op. cit.*, 43.

15 *Ibid*, 42.

16 'Master of the King's Musick', *The Times*, 5 May 1924, 16.

17 Letter from the Earl of Shaftesbury to Sir Frederick Ponsonby, 10 April 1924, in Jerrold Northrop Moore,

Birmingham: The crucible for The Dream

As a Catholic priest, Newman's base was Birmingham. Thus, it may not be incidental that in 1898, less than a decade from Newman's demise, Elgar, a Roman Catholic by birth, thought of setting *The Dream of Gerontius* when he was asked to contribute a work for the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival of 1900. He started working on the composition in autumn of 1899. Work progressed rapidly thanks to August Jaeger, the editor at the publisher *Novello*, who was instrumental in having Elgar's work completed in the way it has been published, most notable the representation of judgment.¹⁸ The contribution of Jaeger cannot be underestimated as Elgar communicated with him almost on a daily basis. The work was completed three months prior to the premiere.¹⁹ Following the custom of Johann Sebastian Bach who would have devoted his works to 'S.D.G.', Elgar devoted *The Dream of Gerontius* to 'A.M.D.G.', the motto of the Jesuits.²⁰

Andrew Farcah-Colton notes that in August 1900 Elgar added this quotation from John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* to the manuscript score:

This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved and hated, like another; my life was as the vapour and is not; but this I saw and knew: this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory.²¹

Farcah-Colton also argues that Elgar's connection with Newman was not simply theological but poetical:

What made it the right choice, ultimately, was Elgar's profound connection with Newman's poetic vision. Program annotator Michael Steinberg has described the poem as "one of the glories of English verse, its language as fragrant as the smoke rising from the thuribles in the churches that had become [Newman's] spiritual home". The composer had been familiar with the poem since at least 1887, the year he lent his copy to his then future wife, Alice, to help console her following her mother's death. In 1889, he and Alice received another copy as a wedding present.²²

ed., *Edward Elgar: Letters of a Lifetime* (Rickmansworth, Elgar Works, 2012), 430-431.

18 Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 322.

19 Farcah-Colton notes that in August 1900 Elgar added this quotation from John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* to the manuscript score: 'This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved and hated, like another; my life was as the vapour and is not; but *this* I saw and knew: this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory' (Andrew Farcah-Colton, 'The Nearly Impossible Dream', *Opera News* 71, No. 12 (2007), 40.

20 Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 317. 'S.D.G.' is the abbreviation for 'Soli Deo Gloria', translated into English as 'Glory to God alone' whilst 'A.M.D.G.' is the abbreviation for 'Ad maiorem Dei gloriam', translated into English as 'To the greater glory of God'.

21 Farcah-Colton, 'The Nearly Impossible Dream', 40.

22 *Ibid.*

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*« This is the best of me; with
rest, I ate, and drank, and sleep,
loved, and hated, like another,
my life was as the vapour and
dust; but this I saw and
knew: this, if anything, of
mine, is worth your memory.»*

Edward Elgar
Birchwood Lodge.
August 17 1900

The final page of the manuscript score of *The Dream of Gerontius*, with Elgar's quotation from Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*. (Arthur Reynolds collection)

Elgar's libretto and music composition

Newman's work was too long and hence Elgar's libretto omitted sections of it whilst respecting the entire narrative. He makes use of most of Newman's poem in Part I but leaves out significant sections of the meditation, the theme of Part II. Whilst the context of Part I is terrestrial, that of Part II is celestial. Elgar's libretto, half Newman work in length, is the poetical text for musical composition; it was through Elgar that Newman's work is remembered.²³

In Part I, Gerontius is fearful yet hopeful and always confident. Praying and meditating, he is joined by a group of friends. Peaceful he passes away and valediction by the priest takes place. In Part II, Gerontius, now 'The Soul', is drawn into a place which is dimensionless and timeless. It becomes conscious that his guardian angel, joyful at the arrival of 'The Soul', is present. After a long discourse, together they pass to the judgment throne. On their way, they encountered a group of demons and choirs of angels. The Angel of the Agony begs with Christ to standby the souls of the faithful. At last, Gerontius met God and is judged. The guardian angel lands Gerontius into purgatory, with an ultimate blessing and assurance of re-awakening to glory. Part I lasts approximately 35 minutes whilst Part II is about 60 minutes in length. Each includes distinct sections. Gerontius is sung by a tenor, the Angel by a mezzo-soprano and the Priest is a baritone, while the Angel of the Agony is assigned to a bass but given that both the latter parts are short, they are usually sung by the same vocalist. Elgar, whilst in agreement with Newman's conception of the Angel as a male, assign the role to a female singer.²⁴

Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* has been described by some as an oratorio. He disapproved with such opinion although he did stop arguing this point to his publisher.²⁵ Farcah-Colton notes that, indeed, this work ...

... stands apart from the British oratorio tradition altogether, not least because it is through-composed rather than being divided into recitatives, arias and choruses. The distinction stems directly from Newman's poem, which is less a narrative than a metaphysical dialogue portraying the death of a pious Catholic "Everyman" and his soul's subsequent journey to judgment and Purgatory.²⁶

David Lemon argues that, in the closing pages:

Elgar's music is almost entirely *piano* or quieter and employs subtle turns of phrase, keeping as throughout close to the sense of the words. This music-drama approach ... actually increases the emotional level to the point at which people who love the work look forward to utter transcendence.²⁷

23 See Geoffrey Hodgkins, *The Best of Me – A Gerontius Centenary Companion* (Rickmansworth: Elgar Editions, 1999). The title of this publication is inspired from a quote from John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures delivered at Manchester in 1864* (New York: J. Wiley & Son, 1866).

24 See Norma E. Hollingsworth, "I believe in angels...": the Role and Gender of the Angels in *The Dream of Gerontius*', *Elgar Society Journal*, Vol.14, No.5 (July 2006), 5-13.

25 Farcah-Colton, *op. cit.*, 40-43.

26 *Ibid*, 40-42.

27 David Lemon, 'Elgar's *Gerontius*: A dream of transcendence', *Elgar Society Journal*, Vol.12, No.5 (July 2002), 183-190.

Hell at the premiere

The premiere, held on 3 October 1900 at the Birmingham Town Hall, was a debacle. The failure can be attributed for the following four main reasons:

- i. The chorus was composed mostly of amateurs who were unable to handle Elgar's work;
- ii. The unexpected demise of the chorus master, Charles Swinnerton Heap; his substitute William Stockley was not able to comprehend Elgar's music.²⁸
- iii. Hans Richter, the conductor, did not see the full score until the day before the first rehearsal,²⁹ and
- iv. During the performance, two soloists were in poor voice.³⁰

Despite its weak show at the premiere, music critics realized that the shortcomings were not due to the quality of Elgar's work:

... though the ill-prepared premiere was a calamitous failure, *Gerontius* ... was soon recognized as a work of real substance ...³¹

The Dream of Gerontius was more admired on continental Europe than in Britain. It was translated into German and subsequently performed in Düsseldorf in December 1901 and in May 1902. Elgar's work was established in Britain following its performance in London in 1903, the year when it was conducted in the United States, namely at Chicago and New York, and in Sydney, Australia. It was performed in Vienna in 1905, premiered in Paris 1906 and in Toronto in 1911. The entry on Elgar in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, states that this music composition became popular with British choral societies ...

... although its popularity overseas did not survive 1914. Many regard it as Elgar's masterpiece. ... It is unquestionably the greatest British work in the oratorio form, although Elgar was right in believing that it could not accurately be classified as oratorio or cantata.³²

This recalls the critic of Chicago's *Daily News* who had described Elgar's work as a ...

... great choral composition, neither oratorio nor cantata.... [It] is such a departure from the timeworn form of the sacred musical drama that its presentation was in the nature of a revelation.³³

All Elgar's principal works were largely ignored until the 1950s when the Elgar Society was founded with the main objective to promote his music. *The Record Guide* of 1955 did not include *The Dream of Gerontius*.³⁴ Although extracts were recorded in 1916, the work was not recorded in its

28 Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 325.

29 *The Musical Times*, 1 November 1900, 734.

30 William Henry Reed, *Elgar* (London: Dent, 1956), 60.

31 Teachout, *op. cit.*, 43.

32 Michael Kennedy, 'Elgar, Sir Edward William, baronet (1857–1934)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed on 8 December 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32988>

33 Farcah-Colton, *op. cit.*, 43.

34 Andrew Farach-Colton, 'Vision of the Hereafter', *Gramophone*, 2003 (February), 36-39.

entirety until 1945 by EMI. In 1964 the same company the first stereophonic recording.³⁵

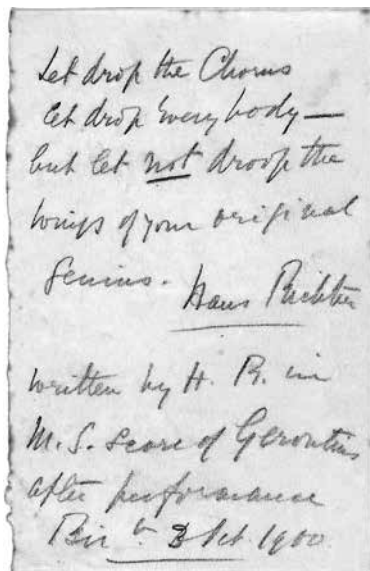
The Dream ... in the history of musicology

The Czech composer and organist Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) had considered setting *The Dream of Gerontius* fifteen years earlier. He, a Roman Catholic, did in fact discuss it with Newman before giving up on the idea:

The matter, indeed, was about fifteen years ago discussed between [Cardinal Newman] and Dr. Dvořák, who afterwards found the subject too placid and lyrical for his special style.³⁶

The link between Elgar and Dvořák goes beyond Newman's work. The Austrian-Hungarian Hans Richter (1843-1916), musically associated with Richard Wagner (1813-1883), had conducted works for both.³⁷ Richter, who was introduced to the British scene by Wagner in 1877 to conduct a series of concerts in London; became the principal conductor of the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival in 1885, a post which he retained until 1909.³⁸ He had thus conducted the first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*. On autographing the manuscript score, he wrote:

Let drop the Chorus, let drop everybody—but let not drop the wings of your original genius.³⁹



Elgar's note of Richter's comments in the manuscript score of *Gerontius*. (Elgar Birthplace Museum)

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- 35 The conductors for the 1945 and the 1964 recordings were Sir Malcolm Sargent and Sir John Barbirolli respectively.
- 36 Quoted in Graham Melville-Mason, 'Dvořák and Elgar', *Rethinking Dvořák: Views from Five Countries*, ed. David R. Beveridge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 225-233. Melvin-Mason makes reference to Moore (*Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 291) who, in turn, quotes this statement and enters as source 'Newspaper cutting at the Elgar Birthplace' (ibid, fn. 22).
- 37 John Clapham, *Antonin Dvořák, Musician and Craftsman* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966). In 1891, the University of Cambridge conferred Dvořák with an honorary degree, an honour conferred later on Elgar.
- 38 Christopher Fifield, *True Artist and True Friend: A Biography of Hans Richter* (Oxford University Press, 1993). Hans Richter also directed Hallé Orchestra, Manchester, from 1899 to 1911, and the London Symphony Orchestra from 1904 to 1911.
- 39 *The Musical Times*, 1 November 1900, 734.

Richter, who had already conducted the premiere of the ‘Enigma’ Variations, was a great admirer of Elgar’s work. For a few English critics at the time, Elgar was ...

... more like Sergei Rachmaninoff or Richard Strauss, a genius born too late to have fit comfortably into his own time.⁴⁰

An organist and composer of note who had personal acquaintance with Elgar was Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924).⁴¹ The American-born musicologist Jerrold Northrop Moore, one of the major authorities on Elgar’s life and works, notes that after attending Elgar’s First Symphony in 1908, Fauré joined him for dinner.⁴² Fauré was the teacher of Prof. A. Courtonne, later the organist at Nantes Cathedral. Karm Scerri (1905-1981), whilst preparing for priesthood in France, had undertaken his musical studies under Courtonne.⁴³ Scerri was the organist at Luçon Cathedral of Notre Dame of the Assumption, France, from 1933 until 1940 and, after the Second World War, at St John’s Co-Cathedral in Malta. Scerri was also a composer of sacred music who flourished in the second half of twentieth century Malta, the island which hosted Newman in 1832-3.⁴⁴

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40 Teachout, *op. cit.*, 42.

41 Jessica Duchon, *Gabriel Fauré* (London: Phaidon, 2000).

42 Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 547.

43 Ġuże Aquilina, ‘Gallery of Distinguished Maltese: Mgr Carmelo Scerri (1905)’, *The Times of Malta*, 27 May 1980, 5. This article is a concise review of Dun Karm’s priesthood, his studies in France and ends with his contributions to music. In 1960, the French Government bestowed Dun Karm with the title of Chavalier des Palmes Academique Francais (Michael J. Schiavone, *Dictionary of Maltese Biographies* (Malta: Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2009), Vol.2, 1425).

44 Paul Cassar, ‘Two Letters by Cardinal John Henry Newman in Malta: Their historical background’, *Scientia*, 27, No.2 (1961), 64-71; Thomas Freller, *Malta and the Grand Tour* (Malta: Midseabooks, 2009), 172, 197-8.