

The Dream of Gerontius. The Libretto.

Such is the popularity today of Elgar's oratorio that it is easy to overlook the fact that Newman's poem, which Elgar took as the basis of his libretto, had experienced remarkable success in its own right long before Elgar turned his serious attention to it. It was reprinted numerous times during Newman's own lifetime, translated into French and German, and carried by General Gordon whose handwritten annotations were metriculously copied by admirers onto their own copies after Gordon's death at Khartoum.

Although Elgar was forced by impending deadlines to work quickly in adapting Newman's poem into a workable libretto, it cannot have been an easy task. Although the libretto for Part One of the oratorio required a fairly limited reduction of Newman's text, Part Two was a different matter. Newman's poem is more than twice the length of Elgar's libretto, requiring Elgar to omit whole sections from Newman's poem while maintaining the narrative thrust which gives the work such vitality. Today, Newman's poem can be regarded as something of a period piece, a dramatic representation of the Catholic theology of death written to enlighten a largely uneducated Catholic congregation. It is through Elgar's libretto that the poem lives on.

Space prevents a reproduction of Newman's complete text here, although it can be found in full in Elgar Edition's *Gerontius* companion *The Best of Me*, complete with Gordon's markings and with the words retained in Elgar's libretto distinguished by use of italics. But we present here Elgar's full libretto, sung today by choirs the world over.

PART ONE

Gerontius

Jesu, Maria - I am near to death,
And Thou art calling me; I know it now.
Not by the token of this faltering breath,
This chill at heart, this dampness on my brow, -
(Jesu have mercy! Mary, pray for me!)
'Tis this new feeling, never felt before,
(Be with me, Lord, in my extremity!)
That I am going, that I am no more,
'Tis this strange innermost abandonment,
(Lover of souls! great God! I look to Thee,)
This emptying out of each constituent
And natural force, by which I come to be.
Pray for me, O my friends; a visitant
Is knocking his dire summons at my door,
The like of whom, to scare me and to daunt,
Has never, never come to me before;
So pray for me, my friends, who have not
strength to pray.

Assistants

Kyrie eleison.

Holy Mary, pray for him.

All holy Angels, pray for him.

Choirs of the righteous, pray for him.

All Apostles, all Evangelists, pray for him.

All holy Disciples of the Lord, pray for him.

All holy Innocents, pray for him.

All holy Martyrs, all holy Confessors,

All holy Hermits, all holy Virgins,

All ye Saints of God, pray for him.

Gerontius

Rouse thee, my fainting soul, and play the man;

And through each waning span

Of life and thought as still has to be trod,

Prepare to meet thy God.

And while the storm of that bewilderment

Is for a season spent,

And ere afresh the ruin on me fall,

Use well the interval.

Assistants

Be merciful, be gracious; spare him, Lord.

Be merciful, be gracious; Lord, deliver him.

From the sins that are past;

From Thy frown and Thine ire;

From the perils of dying;

From any complying

With sin, or denying

His God, or relying

On self, at the last;

From the nethermost fire;

From all that is evil;

From power of the devil;

Thy servant deliver,

For once and for ever.

By Thy birth, and by Thy Cross,

Rescue him from endless loss;

By Thy death and burial,

Save him from a final fall;

By Thy rising from the tomb,

By Thy mounting up above,

By the Spirit's gracious love

Save him in the day of doom.

Gerontius

Sanctus fortis, Sanctus Deus,
De profundis oro te,
Miserere, Judex meus,
Parce mihi, Domine.

Firmly I believe and truly
God is Three, and God is One;
And I next acknowledge duly
Manhood taken by the Son.
And I trust and hope most fully
In that Manhood crucified;
And each thought and deed unruly
Do to death, as He has died.
Simply to His grace and wholly
Light and life and strength belong.

And I love, supremely, solely,
Him the holy, Him the strong.
Sanctus fortis, Sanctus Deus,
De profundis oro te,
Miserere, Judex meus,
Parce mihi, Domine.

And I hold in veneration,
For the love of Him alone,
Holy Church, as His creation,
And her teachings, as His own.
And I take with joy whatever
Now besets me, pain or fear,
And with a strong will I sever
All the ties which bind me here.

Adoration aye be given,
With and through the angelic host,
To the God of earth and heaven,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Sanctus fortis, Sanctus Deus,
De profundis, oro te,
Miserere, Judex meus,
Mortis in discrimine.

I can no more; for now it comes again,
That sense of ruin, which is worse than pain,
That masterful negation and collapse
Of all that makes me man.

. . . And, crueller still,

A fierce and restless fright begins to fill
The mansion of my soul. And worse, and worse,
Some bodily form of ill
Floats on the wind, with many a loathsome curse
Tainting the hallowed air, and laughs, and flaps

Its hideous wings
And makes me wild with horror and dismay.
O Jesu, help! pray for me, Mary, pray!
Some Angel, Jesu! such as came to Thee
In Thine own agony . . .
Mary, pray for me. Joseph, pray for me.
Mary, pray for me.

Assistants

Rescue him, O Lord, in this his evil hour,
As of old, so many by Thy gracious power:-
Noe from the waters in a saving home; (Amen.)
Job from all his multi-form and fell distress; (Amen.)
Moses from the land of bondage and despair; (Amen.)
David from Golia and the wrath of Saul; (Amen.)
. . . - So, to show Thy power,
Rescue this Thy servant in his evil hour.

Gerontius

Novissima hora est; and I fain would sleep,
The pain has wearied me. . . . Into Thy hands,
O Lord, into Thy hands. . . .

The Priest and Assistants

Proficiscere, anima Christiana, de hoc mundo!
Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul!
Go from this world! Go, in the Name of God
The Omnipotent Father, Who created thee!
Go, in the Name of Jesus Christ, our Lord,
Son of the Living God, Who bled for thee!
Go, in the Name of the Holy Spirit,
Who Hath been poured out on thee!
Go in the name
Of Angels and Archangels; in the name
Of Thrones and Dominations; in the name
Of Princedoms and of Powers; and in the name
Of Cherubim and Seraphim, go forth!
Go, in the name of Patriarchs and Prophets;
And of Apostles and Evangelists,
Of Martyrs and Confessors, in the name
Of holy Monks and Hermits; in the name
Of holy Virgins; and all Saints of God,
Both men and women, go! Go on thy course;
And may thy place today be found in peace,
And may thy dwelling be the Holy Mount
Of Sion: - through the Same, through Christ our Lord.

PART TWO

Soul of Gerontius

I went to sleep; and now I am refreshed
A strange refreshment: for I feel in me
An inexpressive lightness, and a sense
Of freedom, as I were at length myself,
And ne'er had been before. How still it is!
I hear no more the busy beat of time,
No, nor my fluttering breath, nor struggling pulse;
Nor does one moment differ from the next.
This silence pours a solitariness
Into the very essence of my soul;
And the deep rest, so soothing and so sweet,
Hath something too of sternness and of pain.
Another marvel: someone has me fast
Within his ample palm; . . .
. . . A uniform
And gentle pressure tells me I am not
Self moving, but borne forward on my way.
And hark! I hear a singing; yet in sooth I
cannot of that music rightly say
Whether I hear, or touch, or taste the tones.
Oh, what a heart-subduing melody!

Angel

My work is done,
My task is o'er,
And so I come,
Taking it home
For the crown is won,
Alleluia,
For evermore.

My Father gave
In charge to me
This child of earth
E'en from its birth
To serve and save.
Alleluia,
And saved is he.

This child of clay
To me was given,
To rear and train
By sorrow and pain
In the narrow way,

Alleluia,
From earth to heaven.

Soul

It is a member of that family
Of wond'rous beings, who, ere the world were made,
Millions of ages back, have stood around The throne of God.
I will address him. Mighty one, my Lord,
My Guardian Spirit, all hail!

Angel

All hail!
My child and brother, hail! what wouldest thou?

Soul

I would have nothing but to speak with thee
For speaking's sake. I wish to hold with thee
Conscious communion; though I fain would know
A maze of things, were it but meet to ask,
And not a curiousness.

Angel

You cannot now
Cherish a wish which ought not to be wished.

Soul

Then I will speak: I ever had believed
That on the moment when the struggling soul
Quitted its mortal case, forthwith it fell
Under the awful Presence of its God,
There to be judged and sent to its own place.
What lets me now from going to my Lord?

Angel

Thou art not let; but with extremest speed

Art hurrying to the Just and Holy Judge.

Soul

Dear Angel, say,
Why have I now no fear of meeting Him?
Along my earthly life, the thought of death
And judgment was to me most terrible.

Angel

It is because
Then thou didst fear; that now thou dost not fear.
Thou hast forestalled the agony, and so

For thee bitterness of death is passed.
Also, because already in thy soul
The judgement is begun.
A presage falls upon thee, as a ray
Straight from the Judge, expressive of thy lot.
That calm and joy uprising in thy soul
Is first-fruit to thee of thy recompense,
And heaven begun.

Soul

Now that the hour is come, my fear is fled;
And at this balance of my destiny,
Now close upon me, I can forward look
With a serenest joy.
But hark! upon my sense
Comes a fierce hubbub, which would make me fear
Could I be frightened.

Angel

We are now arrived
Close on the judgement-court; that sullen howl
Is from the demons who assemble there,
Hungry and wild, to claim their property,
And gather souls for hell. Hark to their cry!

Soul

How sour and how uncouth a dissonance!

Demons

Low born clods
Of brute earth,
They aspire
To become gods,
By a new birth,
And an extra grace,
And a score of merits,
As if aught
Could stand in place
Of the high thought,
And the glance of fire
Of the great spirits,
The powers blest;
The lords by right,
The primal owners,
Of the proud dwelling
And realm of light, -
Dispossessed,

Aside thrust,
Chucked down,
By the sheer might
Of a despot's will,
Of a tyrant's frown,
Who after expelling
Their hosts, gave,
Triumphant still,
And still unjust,
Each forfeit crown
To psalm-droners,
And canting groaners,
To every slave,
And pious cheat,
And crawling knave,
Who licked the dust
Under his feet.

Angel

It is the restless panting of their being;
Like beasts of prey, who, caged within their bars,
In a deep hideous purring have their life,
And an incessant pacing to and fro.

Demons

The mind bold
And independent,
The purpose free,
So we are told,
Must not think
To have the ascendant.
What's a saint?
One whose breath
Doth the air taint
Before his death;
A bundle of bones,
Which fools adore,
When life is o'er.
Ha! Ha!
Virtue and vice,
A knave's pretence.
'Tis all the same,
Ha! Ha!
Dread of hell-fire,
Of the venomous flame,
A coward's plea.
Give him his price,

Saint though he be,
From shrewd good sense
He'll slave for hire,
Ha! Ha!
And does but aspire
To the heaven above
With sordid aim,
And not from love.
Ha! Ha!

Soul

I see not those false spirits; shall I see
My dearest Master, when I reach His throne?

Angel

Yes, - for one moment thou shalt see thy Lord,
One moment; but thou knowest not, my child,
What thou dost ask; that sight of the Most Fair
Will gladden thee, but it will pierce thee too.

Soul

Thou speakest darkly, Angel! and an awe
Falls on me, and a fear lest I be rash.

Angel

There was a mortal, who is now above
In the mid-glory: he, when near to die,
Was given communion with the Crucified, -
Such that the Masters very wounds were stamped
Upon his flesh; and from the agony
Which thrilled through body and soul in that embrace,
Learn that the flame of the Everlasting Love
Doth burn ere it transform. . .

Choir of Angelicals

Praise to the Holiest in the height,
And in the depth be praise:

Angel

. . . Hark to those sounds!
They come of tender beings angelical,
Least and most childlike of the sons of God.

Choir of Angelicals

Praise to the Holiest in the height,
And in the depth be praise;
In all His words most wonderful;

Most sure in all His ways!
To us His elder race He gave
To battle and to win,
Without the chastisement of pain,
Without the soil of sin.
The younger son He willed to be
A marvel in His birth:
Spirit and flesh His parents were;
His home was heaven and earth.
The eternal blessed His child, and armed,
And sent Him hence afar,
To serve as champion in the field
Of elemental war.
To be His Viceroy in the world
Of matter, and of sense;
Upon the frontier, towards the foe,
A resolute defence.

Angel

We now have passed the gate, and are within
The House of Judgement. . .

Soul

The sound is like the rushing of the wind -
The summer wind - among the lofty pines.

Choir of Angelicals

Glory to Him, Who evermore
By truth and justice reigns;
Who tears the soul from out its case,
And burns away its stains!

Angel

They sing of thy approaching agony,
Which thou so eagerly didst question of.

Soul

My soul is in my hand: I have no fear, -
But hark! a grand mysterious harmony:
It floods me, like the deep and solemn souls
Of many waters.

Angel

And now the threshold, as we traverse it,
Utters aloud its glad responsive chant.

Choir of Angelicals

Praise to the Holiest in the height,
And in the depth be praise:
In all His words most wonderful;
Most sure in all His ways!
O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.
O Wisest love! that flesh and blood
Which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against the foe,
Should strive and should prevail.
And that a higher gift than grace
Should flesh and blood refine,
God's Presence and His very Self,
And Essence all divine.
O generous love! that He who smote
In man for man the foe,
The double agony in man
For man should undergo;
And in the garden secretly,
And on the cross on high,
Should teach His brethren and inspire
To suffer and to die.
Praise to the Holiest in the height,
And in the depth be praise:
In all His words most wonderful,
Most sure in all His ways!

Angel

Thy judgement now is near, for we are come
Into the veiled presence of our God.

Soul

I hear the voices that I left on earth.

Angel

It is the voice of friends around thy bed,
Who say the 'Subvenite' with the priest.
Hither the echoes come; before the Throne
Stands the great Angel of the Agony,
The same who strengthened Him, what time He knelt
Lone in the garden shade; bedewed with blood.
That Angel best can plead with Him for all
Tormented souls, the dying and the dead.

Angel of the Agony

Jesu! by that shuddering dread which fell on Thee;
Jesu! by that cold dismay which sickened Thee;
Jesu! by that pang of heart which thrilled in Thee;
Jesu! by that mount of sins which crippled Thee;
Jesu! by that sense of guilt which stifled Thee;
Jesu! by that innocence which girdled Thee;
Jesu! by that sanctity which reigned in Thee;
Jesu! by that Godhead which was one with Thee;
Jesu! spare these souls which are so dear to Thee;
Souls, who in prison, calm and patient, wait for Thee;
Hasten, Lord, their hour, and bid them come to Thee,
To that glorious Home, where they shall ever gaze on Thee.

Soul

I go before my Judge. . .

Voices on Earth

Be merciful, be gracious; spare him, Lord
Be merciful, be gracious; Lord, deliver him.

Angel

. . . Praise to His Name!
O happy, suffering soul! for it is safe,
Consumed, yet quickened, by the glance of God.

Soul

Take me away, and in the lowest deep
There let me be,
And there in hope the lone night-watches keep,
Told out for me.
There, motionless and happy in my pain
Lone, not forlorn, -
There will I sing my sad perpetual strain,
Until the morn,
There will I sing, and soothe my stricken breast,
Which ne'er can cease
To throb, and pine, and languish, till possess
Of its Sole Peace.
There will I sing my absent Lord and Love: -
Take me away,
That sooner I may rise, and go above,
And see Him in the truth of everlasting day.
Take me away, and in the lowest deep
There let me be.

Souls in Purgatory

Lord, Thou hast been our refuge: in every generation;
Before the hills were born, and the world
was, from age to age Thou art God.
Bring us not, Lord, very low: for Thou hast
said, Come back again, O Lord! how long:
and be entreated for Thy servants.

Angel

Softly and gently, dearly-ransomed soul,
In my most loving arms I now enfold thee,
And o'er the penal waters, as they roll,
I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee.
And carefully I dip thee in the lake,
And thou, without a sob or a resistance,
Dost through the flood thy rapid passage take,
Sinking deep, deeper, into the dim distance.
Angels to whom the willing task is given,
Shall tend, and nurse, and lull thee, as liest;
And Masses on the earth, and prayers in heaven,
Shall aid thee at the Throne of the Most Highest.
Farewell, but not for ever! brother dear,
Be brave and patient on thy bed of sorrow;
Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here,
And I will come and wake thee on the morrow.
Farewell! Farewell!

Souls

Lord, Thou hast been our refuge, etc. Amen

Choir of Angelicals

Praise to the Holiest, etc. Amen.