Sunday 8 November / 3pm

Elgar's Dream of Gerontius

Edward Elgar (1857 - 1934)

The Dream of Gerontius, Op. 38

Prelude – Part I – Part II

Gerontius is old and sick; he may even be dying. As he suffers, he's tormented by fear as well as pain, and he grasps desperately at his religious faith, muttering long-remembered prayers. Friends and loved ones gather around him, praying; and as he slips into unconsciousness a priest bids him farewell. There is silence. And then…Gerontius awakes, somehow refreshed – "as I were at length myself / And ne'er had been before". He senses that he is not alone; that a being of unbounded wisdom and compassion is watching over him. And as he listens to its song, he begins a new journey, into mysteries so beautiful – and terrible – that words alone are powerless to describe them.

That didn't prevent John Henry Newman's poem *The Dream of Gerontius* from becoming a bestseller upon its publication in 1864. Newman's words certainly spoke to the heart of the Catholic Edward Elgar: Elgar had owned a copy of *The Dream of Gerontius* since at least 1885 (he received another as a wedding present in 1889). So at New Year 1900, when the committee of the Birmingham Triennial Festival approached Elgar with a commission, he was already primed to respond.

Elgar worked at fever-heat in his rented cottage at Birchwood Lodge near Storridge in Worcestershire – trimming Newman's verses, and picking out the passages that moved him most powerfully. This was a long way from the kind of solid, respectable oratorio that the Festival expected. It's more personal (and infinitely more passionate) than that: a spiritual drama rather than an act of worship. Gerontius, said Elgar to his publisher Jaeger, is "a man like us, not a priest or a saint, but a *sinner*, a repentant one of course but still no end a *worldly man* in his life, and now brought to book. Therefore I've not filled *his* part with Church tunes and rubbish but a good, healthy full-blooded Romantic, remembered worldliness".

And something more than that, too. For Gerontius, the singing of the heavenly hosts is like "the summer wind, among the lofty pines". At the climax of the whole drama, as Gerontius's soul approaches the seat of Judgement, Elgar initially declined to portray the actual presence of the Almighty. Jaeger pleaded, cajoled, and finally taunted him into meeting the challenge: "It wanted a Wagner or a R.Strauss to do that, nobody else would dare attempt it". Without a word, Elgar returned to the nearly-completed manuscript and added the blinding flash of sound that no-one who hears *The Dream of Gerontius* ever forgets. On 3 August 1900 he signed and dated the completed score, with the dedication A.M.D.G. (To the greater glory of God). The premiere was set for the morning of Wednesday 3 October, in Birmingham Town Hall.

To say that the first performance disappointed Elgar is an understatement. But Elgar lived to see *The Dream of Gerontius* become a classic, and it was performed at his memorial service in Worcester Cathedral in 1934 – though he was actually laid to rest some miles away in the quiet Catholic churchyard at Little Malvern. By then, it was a rare music-lover who would have disagreed with the words (by John Ruskin) that Elgar inscribed on the finished score, that day at Birchwood in the late summer of 1900:

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.*

Dinis Sousa

Dinis Sousa is Music Director of the Royal Northern Sinfonia (RNS) and Founder and Artistic Director of the award-winning Orquestra XXI. Winner of the 2023 Critics' Circle Young Talent (Conductor) Award, he has led RNS programmes with Víkingur Ólafsson, Stephen Hough, Benjamin Grosvenor, Pierre Laurent Aimard and Kristian Bezuidenhout, a Ravel anniversary celebration, Handel's Messiah, and a special community performance of Michael Tippett's A Child of Our Time.

As a guest conductor, recent and upcoming debuts include the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestre National de France, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Bamberg Symphony Orchestra, Lucerne Symphony Orchestra, São Paulo State Symphony Orchestra, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. He has earned acclaim for performances with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and for a complete Beethoven cycle with the Monteverdi Choir and Orchestras.

Sarah Connolly

Sarah Connolly was made a DBE in the 2017 Birthday Honours, having previously been awarded a CBE in the 2010 New Year Honours. In 2020 she was made an Honorary Member of the Royal Philharmonic Society in recognition of her outstanding services to music.

In 2023 she was awarded The King's Medal for Music, an award given annually to an outstanding individual or group of musicians who have had a major influence on the musical life of the nation.

She has sung at the Aldeburgh, Edinburgh, Lucerne, Salzburg and Tanglewood Festivals and the BBC Proms where, in 2009, she was a memorable soloist at the Last Night. Opera engagements have taken her around the world from the Metropolitan Opera to the Royal Opera House, the Paris Opera, La Scala Milan, the Vienna and Munich State Operas and the Bayreuth, Glyndebourne and Aix-en-Provence Festivals.

Dame Sarah is a Vocal Professor and Fellow at her alma mater the Royal College of Music, a Trustee of the Countess of Munster Musical Trust, and Ambassador for the Monteverdi Choir and Orchestras' Apprentices Programme.

Benjamin Hulett

Benjamin Hulett trained as a choral scholar at New College, Oxford and studied with David Pollard at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He was a member of the Hamburgische Staatsoper from 2005 to 2009. He has since made debuts at the Bayerische Staatsoper, Deutsche Staatsoper, Wiener Staatsoper, Theater an der Wien, the Salzburger Festspiele, Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, the Royal Ballet & Opera, Madrid's Teatro Real and the Opera di Roma.

Highlights in Benjamin's 2026/27 season include Kudrjas in Kat'a Kabanova for the Royal Ballet & Opera and in a new production for the Polish National Opera and Arbace in a new production of Idomeneo for the Glyndebourne Festival.

His concert engagements will include Britten's St Nicolas at Snape Maltings Concert Hall with the BBC Singers/Owain Park to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Britten's death, Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius with the Royal Northern Sinfonia/Dinis Sousa and Haydn's The Creation with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra/David Hill. He will also tour Schubert's Mass No. 6 with Collegium Vocale Gent and the Orchestre des Champs-Elysees/Philippe Herreweghe.

Roderick Williams

Roderick Williams is one of the most sought-after baritones of his generation with a wide repertoire spanning baroque to contemporary. He enjoys relationships with major UK and European opera houses and also performs regularly with leading conductors and orchestras throughout the UK, Europe, North America and Australia. Festival appearances include the BBC Proms, Edinburgh, Cheltenham, Aldeburgh and Melbourne. As a recitalist he is in demand around the world and appears regularly at venues including the Wigmore Hall, Concertgebouw and Musikverein and at festivals including Leeds Song, Oxford International Song, Aldeburgh, Edinburgh, Swaledale, Ryedale and Ludlow Song.

Roderick Williams was awarded an OBE in June 2017 and was Artist in Residence with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra from 2020 – 22, Artist in Residence at the 2023 Aldeburgh Festival and Singer in Residence at Music in the Round. He was also one of the featured soloists at the coronation of King Charles III in 2023.

As a composer he has had works premièred at Wigmore Hall, the Barbican, the Purcell Room and on national radio. In 2016 he won Best Choral Composition at the British Composer Awards and he currently holds the position of Composer in Association of the BBC Singers.

Chorus of Royal Northern Sinfonia

Chorus of Royal Northern Sinfonia is a vital part of the Royal Northern Sinfonia musical family, based at The Glasshouse International Centre for Music in Gateshead. They shine in the great choral masterpieces by Handel, Haydn and Mozart, excel with contemporary classical music by today's brightest composers, and bring film scores to life at live screenings of Hollywood blockbusters such as Home Alone, Hocus Pocus and Star Wars.

Founded in 1973 by Royal Northern Sinfonia's timpanist Alan Fearon, the Chorus currently has over 80 members from all walks of life and all across the North East.

Voices of the River's Edge

VOTRE (Voices of the River's Edge) is a vibrant performance choir welcoming people aged 18 – 35 who want to experience the thrill of singing together and performing on some seriously prestigious stages.

Formed for BBC Proms at The Glasshouse in 2022, VOTRE has continued to grow into a welcoming community of singers from across the North East.

At the heart of VOTRE is the joy of making music together – creating memorable performances, lasting friendships, and plenty of unforgettable moments along the way.

Royal Northern Sinfonia

Internationally renowned, calling Gateshead home.

37 musicians at the top of their game. Electrifying music, old and new. All the talent, determination, and creativity of the North East on a worldwide stage. From their home at The Glasshouse International Centre for Music, Royal Northern Sinfonia share the joy and wonder of orchestral music with thousands of people across the North of England – and beyond – every year.

From symphonies to string quartets, film soundtracks to choral masses, and original performances with awesome artists from Sheku Kanneh-Mason and Víkingur Ólafsson to Sam Fender and JADE, the orchestra's members have got one of the most varied jobs there is.