

Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* - Some personal observations on recordings of the work
by John Quinn

Updated 2020

This article originally appeared on MusicWeb in 2007 in connection with the 150th anniversary of the birth of Elgar and I updated it in 2014 when we marked the 80th anniversary of the death of the composer in 1934. The release in 2018 of a newly-issued 1961 live recording conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent caused me to refer to our [Masterworks Index](#) for *Gerontius* whereupon I discovered, slightly to my surprise, that since my 2014 update this was the fifth recording of the work to be issued – although only two of them were brand new. In addition, I'd caught up with two earlier recordings – conducted by Sir Alexander Gibson and by Yevgeny Svetlanov – to which I'd referred in the survey though I'd not heard them. Time, then, to refresh the survey in order to include these seven recordings.

For this latest 2020 revision I toyed with the idea of a fundamental re-write, considering all the recordings in chronological order. However, on reflection it seems to make more sense to retain the layout of the 2014 text and to add comments about the seven recordings not previously covered by the survey in a new section just before the summary.

I have made as few changes as possible to my original 2007 text because that included detailed comments on several versions that hadn't, at least then, been reviewed on MusicWeb International whereas the more recently released recordings have generally received full reviews at the time of issue.

The Background

On 8 May 1889 Edward Elgar married Alice Roberts at Brompton Oratory. Among the wedding presents he received was a copy of the poem, *The Dream of Gerontius* by John, Cardinal Newman (1801-1890), which was given to him by the parish priest of the Catholic church in Worcester where Elgar had been the organist. Newman's poem had been published in 1865 and Elgar was familiar with it already but now he had his own copy of the text. However, it was not until he received an invitation from the prestigious Birmingham Festival to compose a major choral work for the 1900 festival that Elgar turned in earnest to making a setting of the poem

Newman's poem is a long one, consisting of some 900 lines, including a substantial prologue. Elgar set most of the prologue as Part One of his composition but for Part Two he pruned the main body of the poem drastically, setting only about 300 of its 730 lines. His imagination fired by Newman's verse, Elgar proceeded to compose what the writer Michael Steinberg has described as 'a truly complete response to a poem of immense religious, intellectual, and literary complexity – complete both as an avowal of faith and as a work of human art.'

In 1899 Elgar had scored a conspicuous triumph with the orchestral '*Enigma*' Variations. That work marked a quantum leap forward in terms of his compositional technique, his imagination and his mastery of the orchestra. In the same way *Gerontius* was a huge advance for him as a choral composer. He had already written several large-scale cantatas, but though two of these - *King Olaf* (1896) and *Caractacus* (1898) - are notable pieces, *Gerontius* is a work of genius. In the solo writing of *Gerontius* we find Elgar displaying the same ability to depict characters in music that he had shown in '*Enigma*'. In addition, the writing for the chorus is quite superb and Elgar deploys the choir daringly. This is especially true of the build-up to 'Praise to the Holiest', where the multi-layered choral writing is amazingly assured and, when done well, produces thrilling spatial effects. Later on in that same chorus, when the choir is divided into eight separate parts, the complex individual lines fit together superbly. The orchestration too represents a significant advance, even on '*Enigma*', as the subtlety and power of the orchestral prelude alone demonstrates in abundance. As Michael Kennedy has

observed, '*Gerontius* is the very pivot of his career: it sums up and glorifies all that he had been striving to say with lesser material and subjects, and at the same time looks forward, in its revolutionary ardour, to the symphonies and the later choral works.'

However, what truly sets *Gerontius* apart from all Elgar's previous compositions is the sense of *vision*. Newman's mystical poem clearly held Elgar in thrall. We may wonder how much this complex man, often beset by self-doubt even when at the height of his powers and fame, identified with Gerontius himself. Elgar depicts Gerontius' trepidation, uncertainty and, finally, his sense of smallness beside the immense majesty of God with remarkable prescience. The portrayal of Gerontius' Guardian Angel as a being of serenity, reassurance and protection, yet also of quiet authority, is also remarkably successful.

But the vision was nearly still-born for the première in Birmingham on 3 October 1900 was a near-disaster. The choir, faced with some of the most challenging music they can ever have encountered, was poorly prepared. Unfortunately, the chorus master, who understood Elgar's music, died very suddenly just before rehearsals commenced. His seventy-year-old predecessor was called back out of retirement and was manifestly not up to the task, not least because he was out of sympathy both with the music and, as a Non-Conformist, with the text. The orchestra was equally under-rehearsed and the great German conductor, Hans Richter, who had triumphantly led the first performance of '*Enigma*' in June 1899, had not mastered in advance this new and much more complex score. Somehow, they got through to the end and despite the manifest inadequacies of the performance *Gerontius* was warmly received by both the audience and the critics, though the reception did little to cheer the distraught composer. Despite his failure to give *Gerontius* a fitting première, Hans Richter was clearly moved and impressed by the work. After the first performance he wrote in Elgar's score in his idiosyncratic English: 'Let drop the Chorus, let drop everybody – but let *not* drop the wings of your original Genius.'

The Music

Gerontius has a compelling logic and a narrative inevitability. After the orchestral Prelude, in which all the key musical themes that will be heard in the work are presented, we find the character of Gerontius on his deathbed. Friends and a priest are close at hand. Gerontius alternates between, on the one hand, frailty and trepidation ('Jesu, Maria, I am near to death') and, on the other, courage and faith ('Sanctus fortis'). The chorus, representing his friends, punctuates his last moments with prayers until, after he has breathed his last, they and the Priest commit his soul to God ('Proficiscere, anima Christiana')

When Part Two opens Elgar transports us to another world through the device of a short, luminous prelude of ethereal beauty. The Soul of Gerontius has passed into this spiritual place and here he encounters his Guardian Angel ('My work is done') The Angel's last service is to guide him to Judgement, first leading him safely past the dreadful spectacle of the Demons ('Low-born clods of brute earth'). On the way the Angel explains to Gerontius that he will be granted but a glimpse of God before he is despatched to Purgatory ('Yes, for one moment thou shalt see thy Lord'). The last stages of the journey to Judgement see Gerontius led through the serried ranks of Angelicals, who are praising God, until it is as if great gold doors have been flung open and the hymn of praise erupts ('Praise to the Holiest')

After the tumult of praise has subsided the Angel of the Agony stands close to the throne of God. He begs divine mercy for all those souls that come to judgement, culminating in a deeply moving phrase that is at once grand and supplicatory, ('Hasten, Lord, their hour and bid them come to Thee'). Gerontius stands, humble, insignificant and afraid, before his God ('I go before my judge'). In a masterstroke, Elgar depicts the brief moment when Gerontius sees God orchestrally, as the musical equivalent of a blinding flash of light. 'Take me away' cries Gerontius, in a mixture of fear and

ecstasy. As he begins his time in Purgatory, the Angel calmly reassures him that his time there will pass and that once he is purged his Angel will bring him safely to everlasting life.

Gerontius in Performance

Elgar sets his interpreters many challenges in this work. The bass soloist has least to do but one of the key issues is that his two solos are very different, both in character and in tessitura. The Priest should be noble, dignified and consolatory without ever sounding sanctimonious. The role lies predominantly in the baritone range. The role of the Angel of the Agony ideally calls for a *basso cantante* with a commanding presence and the ability to inspire a degree of awe. Many times, both on record and in concert, I've felt that a soloist is better suited to one role or the other. The ideal solution is to have two singers but this is an expensive luxury. I've never seen it done in a professional performance and to date it's only been done once on record.

Is the role of the Angel better sung by a contralto or a mezzo-soprano? In truth I think the answer is that either type of voice can fulfil the role but all depends on who the singer is. Attitude is all-important. If the singer is too objective then there's a risk of coolness – that happens in at least one of the recordings under discussion here. But I'd rather have coolness than a fulsome approach – thankfully none of our singers falls into that trap. Arguably, nowadays there's a further challenge for singers of the role: the shadow cast by Dame Janet Baker. There can be few roles in music on which one singer has so firmly stamped his or her mark and I'm sure I am not the only person who cannot hear certain phrases without hearing in my head the way Dame Janet inflected them. In fact, it's just as much of a challenge to listeners such as me to put those thoughts aside when listening as it is for singers to put their own stamp on the role.

As for the tenor, Elgar all but asks the impossible. On the one hand, Gerontius needs the power and stamina of a *Heldentenor* for passages such as 'Sanctus fortis' and 'Take me away'. On the other hand, much of the role, especially in Part Two, demands the subtlety of a *Lieder* singer. Furthermore, the singer must convincingly suggest a dying man at the start of the work yet be capable of meeting the rigours of 'Sanctus, Fortis'. Then, in Part Two, he must express, without overdoing it, a sense of wonder, fear and awe as he portrays the Soul experiencing life after death. Identification with the text and the character are crucial and not every one of our soloists passes this test. But if one encounters a singer who can satisfy most, if not all, of Elgar's demands then the rewards are great. Arguably, prior to *Gerontius*, it's only in *Elijah* that we find as full a portrayal of a character in a piece of concert music with a religious theme

The chorus, too, must play their part. It's often forgotten how little of the music in *Gerontius* actually involves the choir: only about one third, I'd say. The rest consists of solos and two orchestral preludes. However, the choral music is very challenging and it's easy to see why the ill-prepared chorus came to grief at the première. The long lead-up to 'Praise to the Holiest', with its many layers and luminous textures, is a major test. So too, in a very different way, is the Demon's Chorus, where, in Barbirolli's memorable phrase, the chorus should avoid sounding 'like bank clerks on a Sunday outing'.

But inevitably the greatest challenges are faced by the conductor, who must hold the whole thing together and inspire a performance of strength and feeling while eschewing any religiosity. He (or she) must also bring out the drama in the work. There are large forces to control and complex ensembles to direct. Yet much of the music, especially at the start of Part Two, is intimate and subtle. But Elgar helps his conductor. As in all his works, the score is littered with copious instructions as to tempo and dynamics. As a highly experienced Elgar conductor told me more than once, it's all in the score and "all" the conductor has to do is to follow Elgar's markings! *Gerontius* is difficult to define – and impossible to pigeonhole – but it is very far removed from "conventional" Victorian oratorio and often almost operatic in its intensity and sense, almost, of theatre. Elgar's achievement is particularly remarkable since he must have been exposed to – and found it hard to break free from – the

influence of many a second-rate oratorio during his formative years in Worcester. For the conductor, finding the balance between religious sentiment and the essential drama of the piece is not easy but it's the key.

The recordings

As far as I know all the recordings covered in this survey are currently available unless otherwise stated. The only recording which I'm certain I have not heard is the one recorded in Poole in 1996, which was conducted by David Hill for Naxos (8.553885/6) with soloists William Kendall, Sarah Fryer and Matthew Best, the Waynflete Singers and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. There may be other recordings out there of which I am unaware in which case I hope readers will draw them to my attention. It's interesting to note in passing the extent to which EMI or various divisions of that company originally led the way in recording this work. The survey that follows consists of some personal reflections on all the recordings that I have heard.

Historic incomplete recordings

Before dealing with the complete recordings mention should be made of some fascinating historical recordings of extracts. In 2007 I stated that the first-ever recordings of parts of *Gerontius* were made – by HMV, which was eventually to become part of EMI – in 1927 with Elgar himself conducting. My colleague, Jonathan Woolf, then kindly pointed out to me that some 65 minutes of music were recorded in October 1924 by Joseph Batten (1885-1955) who conducted the Royal Symphony Orchestra and a small, uncredited chorus, which may well have included the soloists. The solo roles were taken by the Welsh tenor, Dan Jones, Edith Furmedge (1890-1956) and David Brazell (1875-1959). I'm grateful to Jonathan, who subsequently made it possible for me to hear this recording. It has been transferred by Michael Dutton and issued by his label under the auspices of the Elgar Society as Volume 4 in the series, *Elgar's Interpreters on Record* (CDLX 7044).

Inevitably the sound of the acoustical recording is restricted and the excerpts leave frustrating gaps in the score but one can get a good idea of Batten's way with the score. The complete Prelude to Part I is included and, apart from one passage where Batten pushes on far too quickly, it's impressively shaped. Overall, Batten seems to have the measure of the score and he conducts these extended extracts well. Jones is an eloquent *Gerontius*, his voice fairly light but firm and ringing. His diction is of its time but very clear. On this evidence it seems Jones must have been an impressive exponent of the role. Edith Furmedge is less to my taste. Unlike Jones, she uses quite a bit of *portamento* and she doesn't appear to characterise the music as well as does Jones. Brazell is a somewhat lugubrious bass: I've heard many better singers in the bass roles. Overall, this set of extracts is well worth hearing.

Incidentally, this CD also gives us a tantalising glimpse of the *Gerontius* of another Welsh tenor, Parry Jones (1891-1963) in an excerpt from Part II, lasting just under 6 minutes, from a 1938 live broadcast conducted by Sir Henry Wood. On this evidence, Parry Jones was an impressive and very expressive *Gerontius*. We also hear briefly, as the Angel, Muriel Brunskill (1899-1980).

Elgar's own partial recordings are highly important, if frustratingly curtailed documents. Over forty minutes of music, including the complete Part One Prelude, were captured in a live performance in London's Royal Albert Hall on 26 February 1927. Later that same year, on 6 September, HMV recorded the composer's performance in Hereford Cathedral during the Three Choirs Festival but only some 16 minutes of that performance have survived onto CD. So far as I know the only CD incarnation of those excerpts is contained in Volume One of EMI's utterly indispensable *Elgar Edition* (EMI Classics CDS 7 54560 2). Though tantalisingly brief, these extracts are of great value and interest.

The Elgar Society has issued a three-disc set, *Elgar's Interpreters on Record*, Vol. 5 (EECD003-5). These CDs contain off-air recordings made by the late Kenneth Leech and include just over thirty minutes of extracts from a 1936 radio broadcast conducted by Adrian Boult. Even more fascinating is no less than seventy-one minutes of excerpts from another broadcast, this time from 1935, conducted by Malcolm Sargent. In both cases the Gerontius is Heddle Nash (1894-1961). Opposite him are two highly contrasted Angels, Astra Desmond (1893-1973) for Sargent and Muriel Brunskill for Boult. In the 1935 broadcast we also hear Keith Falkner (1900-1994) in fine voice in both bass solos, but the bass in the Boult performance, the Australian, Horace Stevens (1876-1950), offers a much less enjoyable listening experience. The sound quality is variable and surface noise is often intrusive, especially in the Sargent extracts. However, whilst the orchestra and chorus are rather dimly heard, meaning that it's unfair to judge their contributions, the soloists are all clearly recorded.

Nash had sung the role of Gerontius for the first time in 1931, at the prompting of Elgar himself, who conducted Nash's first performance. The Sargent performance was noted in Nash's score as the fourth occasion on which he'd sung the work. He's captured in very good voice. He sings with a real feeling for the words and his identification with words and music is complete. Where it's called for his voice has an heroic ring, though what impresses me even more is the sense of inwardness that he conveys. We shall find all these qualities displayed again – and arguably to even greater effect - in his 1945 recording. There are occasions where Nash and Sargent perhaps linger over detail just a bit too much but the conviction of the performance carries the day. Nash brings a fine degree of intimacy and wonder to the dialogue with the Angel in Part Two. His Angel is Astra Desmond, who is described aptly by the late Alan Blyth in the booklet as 'calm and serene.' Keith Falkner is an elevated Priest and a fine Angel of the Agony.

The Boult extracts are in sound that is appreciably better. Nash delivers a superb 'Sanctus fortis'. Muriel Brunskill is a very different type of Angel in comparison with Desmond. Hers is a rounder, fuller voice, a genuine contralto in fact. Horace Stevens was reputed to be a fine exponent of the bass roles but if what we hear in these extracts is representative then that reputation was grossly exaggerated. In fact, he's almost a caricature; his emphatic, portentous delivery of 'Proficiscere' gives me no pleasure whatsoever.

In all these sets of extracts the performing styles are very much of their time and not all modern listeners will react positively. Inevitably, the sound calls for some tolerance, especially in the Sargent recording. But these are all precious documents; one set is conducted by the composer himself, and two are from performances within a couple of years of Elgar's death, both conducted by leading interpreters of the work who indubitably imbibed their performing tradition from the composer himself. It should also be noted that Nash as well as Stuart Wilson (1889-1966) and Tudor Davies (1892-1958) who both sing for Elgar are all tenors of whose performances he is known to have approved.

All the recordings discussed above are ones which all lovers of Elgar's music should try to hear; they are highly relevant to a wider audience than just specialist collectors.

Complete recordings prior to 1970

Dr Malcolm Sargent, 1945

The first complete recording of *Gerontius* was made in Huddersfield Town Hall between 8 and 12 April 1945 under the auspices of the British Council and was conducted by Dr Malcolm Sargent. Walter Legge was the producer. The distinguished cast included Heddle Nash in the title role, Gladys Ripley (1908-1955) as the Angel and, uniquely on record, a baritone, Denis Noble (1898-1966) as The Priest and a bass, Norman Walker (1907-1963) as the Angel of the Agony. Also taking part were The Huddersfield Choral Society and Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. This recording has been issued on several labels in recent years, including Pearl (see [review](#)) and on Pristine Audio (see [review](#)). My experience of this recording is confined to the version issued in 1993 by Testament and my

comments refer only to that transfer. However, Jonathan Woolf has heard all three transfers and it may help collectors to summarize his views of them. He is not enamoured of the Pristine Audio transfer for the reasons mentioned in his review. I'm grateful to him for providing the following comment on his view of the relative merits of the Testament and Pearl versions: 'the Testament is smoother and has been more filtered; it gives an easier aural ride but the Pearl will appeal to those who can absorb shellac hiss and welcome the preserved higher frequencies. I'd go for the Pearl but I suspect the majority would prefer Testament.'

By the time Heddle Nash came to make this recording he had noted twenty-two performances of *Gerontius* in his score, so he was truly a seasoned interpreter and we know that his interpretation of the role was much admired by Elgar. His performance here is, quite simply, wonderful. As in 1935, he and Sargent linger expressively on occasion – for example, in Nash's very first solo. However, 'Sanctus fortis' burns with conviction and throughout Part One the ardour and urgency of Nash's interpretation is readily matched by Sargent. The cry at 'In Thine own agony' sounds as if it has been wrenched from Nash's very being. The hushed inwardness that he achieves through the use of head voice at 'Novissima hora est' makes for a very special moment indeed.

In Part Two, after Sargent has directed a compelling reading of the gently luminous Prelude, Nash sings his opening solo with a miraculously light airiness. Above all he conveys a sense of wonder in these pages that is deeply affecting and he sustains this mood throughout the dialogue with the Angel. Gladys Ripley sings that role quite beautifully. She has a lovely tone, sings sincerely and is most communicative. Hers is a distinguished performance throughout and her achievement is capped by a dignified and touching account of the Farewell.

Walter Legge had the discernment to engage different soloists for the two bass roles, a real piece of luxury casting, and his "extravagance" pays off. Denis Noble is well suited to the higher tessitura of the Priest's role while Norman Walker is a commanding presence as the Angel of the Agony. The Huddersfield Choral Society makes a stirring contribution. One wonders what impact the war must have had on their membership; presumably some younger members would have been away on active service at this time. There's no evidence of weakness, however, and all the big choruses come across very well. The Liverpool orchestra also plays extremely well. The sound has come up remarkably well in this Testament transfer (SBT2025).

Sir Malcolm Sargent, 1954

Sargent, now knighted (in 1947), was back in Huddersfield to re-record the work in November 1954, to mark his impending sixtieth birthday. Again, he conducted the town's Choral Society and the by-now Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. This time his soloists were Richard Lewis (1914-1990), Marjorie Thomas (1923-2008) and John Cameron (1918-2002). Lewis is a very involving *Gerontius*. He's impressive at the start of 'Sanctus fortis' and indeed he sings the whole of that aria splendidly. Hear him, for instance, in the passage beginning at 'And crueller still', which is gripping. Showing, however, that he is responsive to the whole range of the part, he's rapt at 'Novissima hora est'. Throughout the whole set he displays marvellous clarity of tone and diction. His singing gives consistent pleasure and seems effortless.

Marjorie Thomas is a good Angel, if not, perhaps, the most distinctive one has heard. She makes all the expressive points but, happily, never overstates them. The dialogue between the Soul of *Gerontius* and the Angel at the start of Part Two is very well sung by both soloists and it's fluently conducted by Sargent. In the closing section of the work the beginning of 'Take me away' sounds as if the music is being ripped from Lewis and he gives a very good overall performance of the aria. As for Marjorie Thomas's account of the Farewell it seems appropriate to borrow Alan Blyth's phrase and describe it as 'calm and serene'.

EMI didn't repeat the extravagance of 1945 and contented themselves with one soloist for the bass roles. The choice fell upon that fine singer John Cameron. He makes a noble, prayerful Priest. Perhaps he lacks the last ounce of vocal amplitude for the Angel of the Agony, a role that has a lower tessitura overall. However, he sings the part very well, not least those magnificent phrases at 'Hasten, Lord, their hour.'

The singing of the Huddersfield Choral Society has a bit more bite and presence than that of their 1945 counterparts. Perhaps the average age of the choir was a little lower in peacetime? I suspect, however, that it's more to do with the advances in recording technology over the intervening years. Suffice to say that, for the second time, the choral reputation of Huddersfield is well served, although the outburst at 'Praise to the Holiest' is heard more thrillingly on several other recordings and later in the same chorus the passage beginning at 'O loving wisdom of our God' could and should sound more urgent. With another good showing from the Liverpool orchestra this is another very telling contribution by Sargent to the work's discography. I feel that his interpretation is heard to better advantage in its 1945 incarnation though, of course, the remake is in much better sound.

In 2018, a live recording of a 1961 broadcast performance by the same artists was released (see below).

Sir John Barbirolli, 1964

Richard Lewis was also involved in the third complete recording of the work but this time the venue was on the other side of the Pennines. The Free Trade Hall, Manchester was the place where, in December 1964, Sir John Barbirolli assembled the combined forces of the Hallé Choir and Orchestra, the Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus and the professional singers of the Ambrosian Singers, who, I think, formed the semi chorus. Joining Lewis on the soloists' roster were the Finnish bass, Kim Borg (1919-2000) and a young mezzo-soprano named Janet Baker ([review](#)).

I've heard that Lewis was suffering from a cold at the time of these sessions. There are one or two occasions when one wonders if he was in fresher voice for Sargent but the differences, if differences they be, are minor. Once again, he gives a most convincing portrayal. Indeed, in his very first solo he seems to suggest the frailty of the dying Gerontius even more convincingly than he did for Sargent. He's right on top of 'Sanctus fortis', of which he gives a splendid, ringing account. He's alive to every nuance of the role and attains a real spirituality at 'Novissima hora est.' When we encounter him in Part Two, he conveys an inwardness and a sense of wonder to rival, though not surpass, Heddle Nash. In 'Take me away' his singing catches both the anguish and the hope that's inherent in both the words and the music. In summary, Lewis is a first rate Gerontius, one of the finest exponents of the role on disc.

But for me one of the key factors behind the success of this recording is the performance of Dame Janet Baker. When she sings for the first time what was already an exceptionally eloquent performance of the work is taken to a new and higher level. Down the years much has been written about her assumption of this role and for many she is *the* Angel, though I'm sure Dame Janet herself would be the first to dismiss such talk. Nonetheless, the fact remains that for many people, myself included, it's almost impossible to hear certain phrases without hearing in the mind the unique tone quality and inflection that she brought to these passages. These key phrases include 'You cannot now cherish a wish'; 'It is because then thou didst fear'; 'A presage falls upon thee'; and 'There was a mortal'. On these and many other parts of the work Dame Janet has left an enduring mark. With singers of the calibre and intelligence of Lewis and Baker on hand it's no surprise that the dialogue between the Soul and the Angel is deeply satisfying in this recording. Both singers are audibly right inside their roles and, of course, they are guided and inspired by Barbirolli.

I mentioned Dame Janet's participation as a key factor behind the success of this recording. The other is the direction of Sir John Barbirolli. *Gerontius* was a piece that he loved deeply and that

comes through in every bar of this recording. True, there are one or two points when one wonders if he is loving the music just a little *too* much, but he doesn't wallow in the emotion of the work and it's abundantly clear that he inspires his forces to give of their very best, individually and collectively, in the service of Elgar's music. The Hallé Orchestra plays marvellously. The orchestral Prelude to Part One *sings* with Barbirolli as for no one else and in the Prelude to Part Two he coaxes playing of great refinement from the string section. But it's on the choir that he works his strongest alchemy, inspiring them to sing with enormous commitment; there isn't a bank clerk in sight during the Demon's Chorus, which is sung – and played – with real bite. The long build up to 'Praise to the Holiest' is superbly handled and Barbirolli and the engineers realise with great skill the many layers of choral texture. When we reach the great paean of praise itself it's a thrilling moment.

The performance is crowned by a deeply moving account by all concerned of the Angel's Farewell. Here we realise that Dame Janet has saved her best singing of all for the end. She sounds consoling and encouraging but her singing is not just emotionally engaged it's also technically superb. The exquisite top E on the word "hold" in the bar before cue 129 is, for me, almost worth the price of the discs alone.

Sadly, there is a flaw in this set and it's not an inconsiderable one. The bass solos are allotted to the Finnish bass, Kim Borg. I seem to recall reading somewhere that Borg was Barbirolli's own choice for the work. Even if that's not the case, Michael Kennedy remarks in his definitive biography of the conductor that JB had a penchant for bass voices such as Borg's in *Gerontius* and that it mattered not if they weren't English. Sadly, Borg is very badly miscast here. His English pronunciation is idiosyncratic, to put it kindly. One might forgive him that if it were not for the fact that, to my ears at least, the sound he makes is just ugly. I don't detect any great feeling for or understanding of what he's singing and 'Proficiscere' is only rescued by the superb choir. His solo in Part Two is no more appealing and one's enthusiasm for this set must be qualified on account of his involvement. The recording is currently available in EMI's British Composers series (5 735792).

Other Barbirolli performances on record

Before leaving Barbirolli it's worth mentioning another recording that has surfaced from time to time on various unofficial labels. This version captures a live performance given in Rome in November 1957 when Barbirolli directed the chorus and orchestra of the Italian broadcasting organisation, RAI. Once again Barbirolli was given – or chose - a big-voiced European bass, in this case the Pole, Marian Nowkowski (1912-2000). His Angel was that fine English contralto, Constance Shacklock (1913-1999). Most interest lies, however, in the involvement of the remarkable Canadian tenor, Jon Vickers, then aged 31.

Vickers is a powerful, ringing *Gerontius*, as one might expect. But he also encompasses the more sensitive passages well. Constance Shacklock has a rich contralto voice and she sings with feeling and understanding. Marian Nowkowski is not much better suited to the bass roles than was Borg. However, his voice falls more pleasingly on the ear. The English pronunciation of the Italian choir is definitely an acquired taste. In truth, this performance adds nothing to our view of Barbirolli's interpretation of *Gerontius* – though his trademark groans are much more in evidence than on the EMI recording. Lovers of the work will find the performances by Jon Vickers and Constance Shacklock of great interest. In 2008 this recording was issued on the Archipel label and I commented on it in more detail in my [review](#).

A further Barbirolli performance, given in 1959 in New York with Richard Lewis as *Gerontius*, was issued in 2010 in a boxed set on the WHRA label ([review](#)). A notable feature of this performance is the presence of Maureen Forrester as the Angel, a role she never recorded commercially. That's a pity because she makes a strong impression in this concert performance.

Complete recordings: 1970-2006

Benjamin Britten, 1971

Having drawn something of an arbitrary line at the year 1970 I classify the remaining recordings as “non-historic”. The first of these recordings is a bit special for me as it was the first version I ever owned and therefore the one through which I really got to know the work. It also earns something of a unique place in the pantheon because it’s conducted by another composer, Benjamin Britten, who brings some fascinating insights of his own to the work ([review](#)). The recording was made in The Maltings, Snape in 1971, after an Aldeburgh Festival performance.

Britten had an interesting team of soloists. Perhaps predictably the Gerontius was Peter Pears. As the Angel, Britten had the Australian mezzo, Yvonne Minton while John Shirley-Quirk sang the bass roles. Britten scored a particular *coup* by using the choir of King’s College, Cambridge for his semi-chorus. The different timbre of this choir set against the London Symphony Chorus is telling – in a wholly positive way. On no other recording, until Sir Mark Elder’s 2008 version, was the vital semi-chorus contribution so individually defined. The use of the King’s choir in this way suggests to me that Britten had thought about *Gerontius* very deeply.

Early on in the performance there’s another small detail that shows how Britten has thought about the score. In the Prelude to Part One there are two abrupt cut-offs just before cue 10. Britten, however, inserts a bass drum roll at these two points. It’s completely unauthorised but it’s very exciting, though the drama of the abrupt cut-off of the entire orchestra is sacrificed. I wouldn’t want to hear it done this way all the time but it’s good to hear it this way once in a while. I’d never heard this done before or since until the Colin Davis recordings appeared.

Britten’s conducting is very fine. Much of the Prelude has sweep and urgency and he obtains really red-blooded playing from the LSO and singing to match from the LSO Chorus, which is not to say that the performance lacks refinement for that is certainly not the case. Once or twice Britten rather overplays his hand, most notably in the *animato* section of ‘Praise to the Holiest’, from cue 89. Frankly, between here and cue 95 Britten’s urgent pacing becomes rushed and as a result the music has become gabbled before cue 95 is reached. I also wish he’d held back a little immediately before the choir’s great outpouring at ‘Praise to the Holiest’ itself. It’s marked *maestoso* the first time and *molto maestoso* the second time but Britten rather ignores the markings and whilst the result has energy the grandeur is sacrificed. But such miscalculations are rare and what impresses above all in Britten’s reading is the sense of drama. In this, albeit their interpretations are very different, he comes closest to Barbirolli and it’s surely not without significance that of all the conductors under scrutiny here, apart from Sir Andrew Davis, Sir Colin Davis and Sir Mark Elder, Barbirolli and Britten had the most extensive operatic experience.

Peter Pears’ assumption of the title role won’t be to all tastes. He was sixty-one when this recording was made and, arguably, the recording came a few years too late in his career. However, it was a while since I’d listened to this performance and, coming back to it for this retrospect, I was surprised at how good he actually is. He’s ardent in ‘Sanctus fortis’ although he does seem to need to take more breaths than many of his rivals. He floats ‘Novissima hora est’ plangently and, indeed, it’s in the quieter, more introspective sections of the role that he’s at his most effective. Given his eminence as a singer of art songs it’s perhaps no surprise that he’s in his element in the opening paragraphs of Part Two. Here he sings with no little eloquence and he combines very tellingly with the Angel of Yvonne Minton. I detected signs of strain and tiredness by the time we get to ‘Take me away’ and this isn’t the most convincing account of that aria on disc. One interesting small point is that Pears takes the lower alternative at ‘and go above’ in the bar after cue 123, something I’ve not heard done by any other singer on disc – it’s a choice which is rather at odds with the words.

Miss Minton is a very fine Angel. She may not tug at the heart strings in the way that Dame Janet does, but she's at all times tasteful and sensitive. She does the Farewell very nicely indeed, though it's noticeable that Britten is unsentimental here and makes the music flow more than most conductors, though not to its detriment. The third soloist also makes a very distinguished contribution. John Shirley-Quirk is in sovereign voice as the Priest. The Angel of the Agony is not entirely within his best compass but he sings the part well, and he's magnificent at 'Hasten, Lord, their hour.'

This Britten performance would not rank as a first choice but it's a most interesting and vital interpretation and one that anyone interested in the work ought to hear. It's available as part of an attractive Double Decca release coupled with Holst's *Hymn of Jesus* (Boult) and Richard Hickox's first recording of Delius' *Sea Drift* (448 1702)

Sir Adrian Boult, 1975

The next recording to be made was the one for which Elgar enthusiasts had been waiting with no little impatience for many years. At last, in 1975, Sir Adrian Boult was invited to record the work for EMI. He had a very noted exponent of the role of the Angel in Helen Watts and the bass soloist was Robert Lloyd. For the role of Gerontius the choice was a controversial one: the Swedish tenor, Nicolai Gedda. I recall that Gedda's performance drew mixed notices at the time but, according to Michael Kennedy's authoritative biography of Boult, the conductor himself was pleased with the choice, describing Gedda as "Alpha plus". In a letter to the producer, Christopher Bishop, again quoted by Kennedy, Boult thanked Bishop for his 'choice of and responsibility for the soloists, including the brilliant recruitment of an unlikely foreigner.'

In listening to Gedda, I don't have the reservations about his English pronunciation that I do where Kim Borg is concerned. Sometimes the vowels sound a little unnaturally stressed, but overall Gedda is good in this respect. He's eloquent in his first solo, though I find him a touch mannered at 'Rouse thee, my fainting soul.' He's powerful, but also lyrical, in 'Sanctus fortis' but, on the other hand, the aria doesn't quite seem to *flow*. When we get to 'I can no more' Gedda displays a wide range of expression and dynamics but in the passage beginning at 'O Jesu, help!' the music does seem to be pulled about too much. The employment of *mezza voce* at 'Novissima hora est' is excellent.

In the opening solo of Part Two Gedda produces some lovely sounds but I do wonder if his approach doesn't sound just a little studied. The same comment applies to portions of his contribution to the dialogue with the Angel and though 'Take me away' begins thrillingly the body of the solo seems a bit on the slow side, but whether this is down to Gedda, to Boult or to the two of them in alliance is open to question. Though Boult's direction of the whole score bespeaks wisdom and understanding there are a number of occasions - and not all of them involve Gedda - when I feel the pulse is a little too steady.

Helen Watts offers a warm and highly satisfying portrayal of the Angel. She's completely inside the role and I'd describe her interpretation as "central" in terms of its performing tradition - I mean that as a compliment. She displays intelligence and a reassuring presence during the Dialogue in Part Two though I feel that the interactions between Nash and Ripley and between Lewis and Baker offer more. Among felicitous moments, she's gently radiant at 'Thou shalt see thy Lord' and she gives a dedicated account of the Farewell.

The third soloist is Robert Lloyd. He's sonorous as the Priest, singing the solo with great nobility and expression. He's also quite magnificent as the Angel of the Agony and, for me, he's the pick of the singers that we've heard so far who essay both roles. Interestingly, in another letter to Christopher Bishop quoted by Michael Kennedy, Boult expressed regret, after the sessions, that two singers

hadn't been used. He commented, 'the characters are so different, they should *sound* different too.' Boulton is quite right, but Robert Lloyd comes closer than any other bass soloist to proving him wrong.

Boulton benefits from an excellent chorus (the London Philharmonic Choir) and orchestra (New Philharmonia). The orchestral strings deliver a hushed, translucent rendition of the Prelude to Part Two and throughout the recording the orchestral playing in all departments offers warmth or bite, as called for, and great distinction. The choir are fiery Demons. In that chorus they sing with punch and clarity. Later, the build up to 'Praise to the Holiest' is splendidly controlled and realised by the singers and, of course, by Boulton himself, while the great outburst of praise at the start of the chorus, majestically paced by Boulton, is a tremendous moment. As the chorus unfolds, the second section, from cue 89, where the choir divides into two, is delivered with exemplary clarity and when the pace hots up, from cue 95 onwards, the pacing strikes me as near-ideal. All of this is captured in a vintage 1970s EMI recording of great warmth and clarity for which that fine team of Christopher Bishop (producer) and Christopher Parker (engineer) must take full credit. The original CD set suffered from one criminal presentational flaw with Part One broken between the two discs immediately before 'Proficiscere'. I think I've read somewhere that this horrible blunder was eradicated on subsequent reissues: I do hope so.

I'd describe Boulton's performance as "dedicated". It bears the stamp of all his accumulated experience and wisdom but for all that the drama is somewhat underplayed. The reading, while very satisfying on many levels, doesn't always set the pulse racing. For that reason I don't believe it can be counted as first choice but it's an essential chapter in the work's discography. Currently Boulton's recording is available in EMI's British Composers series, coupled with his account of *The Music Makers* (5 665402).

Sir Simon Rattle, 1986

The Boulton performance was issued in 1976 and ten years later EMI recorded yet another performance of the work. It's worth noting that this was the sixth studio recording of the work and all but one had been made by EMI or various predecessors of that company: a proud record. This time it was led by Simon Rattle with his City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the CBSO Chorus. Three soloists with distinguished pedigrees were lined up. Dame Janet Baker and John Shirley-Quirk each made their second recording of the work while the Gerontius, singing the role for the first time on record, was the erstwhile pupil of Heddle Nash, John Mitchinson. Here I must declare an interest for I have known John Mitchinson personally for some years, during which time I've enjoyed hearing him sing this role live on several occasions – including his last-ever performance of the role in November 2006, a performance in which I had the good fortune to take part. I think it's interesting to note that Mitchinson probably essayed more of the heavy operatic tenor roles, including Wagner, than any other tenor under consideration here. During the 1980s and 1990s he was Rattle's tenor of choice for such works as *Das Lied von der Erde*, *Gurrelieder*, and the *Glagolitic Mass*; in all. I understand they gave some 112 concerts together before John Mitchinson retired. Mitchinson is thus ideally equipped to be the most manly Gerontius on disc and he fulfils amply that expectation. However, he was also a noted and expert singer of art songs, with a particular expertise in the field of English song so, unsurprisingly, he was equally alive to the many sensitive nuances of the part, especially in Part Two.

His 'Sanctus fortis' is powerful and commanding but the more reflective pages of that solo are equally well realised. He fines down his voice admirably for 'Novissima hora est', floating the line admirably. All his experience as a character actor in opera comes to the fore in his singing during the opening paragraphs of Part Two and the cultivated nature of his singing brings a real distinction and many insights to his part in the Dialogue. Such passages as 'But hark, a grand mysterious harmony' are here shown to benefit from the resources of an heroic tenor and, predictably, he makes the start of 'Take me away' a thrilling yet anguished moment. At times on sustained notes the vibrato in his voice may distract some listeners though I don't find it a problem and certainly the vibrato doesn't

affect the clarity of the notes in the way that, as we shall see, is a serious drawback in another recording.

Dame Janet had, by this time, over twenty years further experience as the Angel since recording it with Barbirolli and this shows in a reading of great maturity. However, there are trade-offs with the Barbirolli set. To my ears her voice had darkened over the intervening years and I also find a greater degree of freshness in her earlier traversal of the role. Nonetheless her portrayal of the Angel remains deeply satisfying and she has a unique way of warming such phrases as 'You cannot now cherish a wish' and 'A presage falls upon thee.' The Farewell is once again a deeply satisfying and consoling piece of singing. If, for me, her earlier rendition for Barbirolli remains preferable I still wouldn't wish to be without this marvellous example of her singing what was a signature role in the full maturity of her career.

John Shirley-Quirk sings the bass roles with the eloquence and dignity that one came to expect from this fine singer.

Simon Rattle's famed attention to detail is in evidence on this set and, in fact, in terms of sheer beauty and refinement of orchestral sound this is one of the finest recordings the work has received. The CBSO is on top form throughout, as is the CBSO Chorus, and in consequence all the Big Moments make their full impact. However, Rattle is equally successful in realising the more intimate sections of the score, such as a gossamer light account of the Part Two Prelude. There are some moments when perhaps I'd disagree gently with his choice of tempo but, overall, he seems to me to convey the shape and sweep of the work. It had been a little while since I'd heard this performance right through. Returning to it for this survey and hearing it pitted against the competition, as it were, I was agreeably surprised to be reminded how good it is overall. This recording is now on EMI Gemini (5 000612), coupled with Rattle's recording of the *'Enigma' Variations*.

My comments on the remaining recordings can be briefer because in most cases I've written detailed reviews of them on MusicWeb International, which I summarise below. Links to the full reviews are provided.

Richard Hickox, 1988

I missed hearing this version until it was reissued in 2013 as part of the Chandos series, *The Hickox Legacy* ([review](#)). Hickox has the benefit of the LSO on top form and the LSO Chorus offers some of the best and most thrilling choral singing of this work on disc. The trademark Chandos sound is also a big plus for this set. Arthur Davies sings Gerontius. I don't feel he evidences sufficient identification with the character he is portraying in Part I. There's much to admire about his contribution in Part II. In the last analysis, however, I don't think that his Gerontius, for all its merits, quite matches the leading exponents of the role, especially in terms of characterisation and feeling for the text. Felicity Palmer's singing is impressive and expressive, not least her very good account of the Farewell. However, at certain key points, such as 'There was a mortal' I don't feel she brings the same level of intensity to the music as, say, Sarah Connolly or Dame Janet Baker. Her portrayal of the Angel impressed me but didn't move me. Much of Richard Hickox's conducting is admirable and shows empathy with and understanding of the score. I have to admit, however, that I was disconcerted by his spacious treatment of several episodes. The performance has much to commend it. Though I'm glad to have heard it at last I don't believe that it disturbs the leading recommendations

Vernon Handley, 1993

A long-awaited recording appeared in 1993 when Vernon Handley's interpretation was set down. In a neat reversal of the Sargent recordings, the Huddersfield Choral Society travelled to Liverpool to link up in Philharmonic Hall with the RLPO and its chorus. The soloists were Anthony Rolfe Johnson, Catherine Wyn-Rogers and Michael George. I commented in detail on that recording when it was

reissued in 2003 ([review](#)). In summary, Anthony Rolfe-Johnson offers an excellent portrayal of Gerontius, albeit one that emphasises the lyrical aspects of the role but without short changing the dramatic moments. Catherine Wyn-Rogers is, perhaps, a little understated as the Angel and certainly doesn't "do" as much with the words as do some of her rivals – or, indeed, Rolfe-Johnson. However, her portrayal is unaffected and sincere. Her subsequent appearances in the Andrew Davis DVD (see below) and Daniel Barenboim's 2016 live audio recording (see below) do her greater justice.

Vernon Handley draws marvellous playing from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and he's very well served by the combined Liverpool and Huddersfield choirs – he probably has the largest chorus on disc. And the performance benefits hugely from Handley's own attention to detail and his profound understanding of the work. I bought this recording when it first came out and I've always felt that it's been underrated. As the performance is captured in very good sound, adding to the attractions of the set, this makes an excellent bargain recommendation.

Sir Andrew Davis, 1997

Sir Andrew Davis made a number of well-received recordings of music by Elgar, principally for Warner Classics, while he was Chief Conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. For those who rightly admire his work in Elgar the absence of a CD version until quite recently made all the more valuable a DVD of a live performance given in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, in November 1997. The recording is welcome also in that it captures Philip Langridge's Gerontius, which is not otherwise represented on disc. The other two soloists, Catherine Wyn-Rogers and Alastair Miles have appeared in other recordings.

Again, this is a recording on which I commented in full when it was first released ([review](#)). Sir Andrew conducts a very convincing account of the score and Philip Langridge makes an excellent Gerontius. Catherine Wyn-Rogers also has much to offer, though I was a little less enthralled by the contributions of Alastair Miles. In 2008 the editors of *The Penguin Guide* rated this as 'the finest recorded *Gerontius* ever.' I certainly wouldn't go that far, but it's a considerable achievement. Until a 1968 performance led by Sir Adrian Boult was released in 2017 (see below) Sir Andrew's was, as far as I'm aware, the only DVD release of the work to date. It's a very recommendable version.

Sir Colin Davis, 2005

2006 saw the release of a live recording by Sir Colin Davis and the LSO, made in the previous December (LSO Live. LSO0083). The soloists were David Rendall - a very late substitute for Ben Heppner - Anne Sofie von Otter and Alastair Miles. This reading need not detain us long, I'm afraid. It gives me no pleasure to say this as I admired Sir Colin greatly and his recordings of the three symphonies for the LSO Live label confirm him to be a fine Elgarian.

On this recording the orchestra and chorus both perform superbly and, one or two points excepted, I find Sir Colin's interpretation convincing. What lets this performance down and rules it out of court is the contribution of the soloists. Alastair Miles is a hectoring Priest, projecting his voice too forcefully and, in so doing, the dignity and prayerfulness essential to the role elude him completely. On the DVD discussed above, which I saw before this CD came along, I thought his stentorian projection of this role might be explained by his positioning on the platform. However, I doubt that this applies to his performance in the Barbican. The role of the Angel of the Agony suits him better.

Anne Sofie von Otter sings well enough but I find her approach cool and objective and I really do wonder how well she understands the role of the Angel. However, the set's real Achilles heel lies in the singing of David Rendall. Right from the start he sings with such a very wide and pronounced vibrato that, to be truthful, I often find it difficult to be sure of the precise pitch of the notes he is singing. This applies at all levels of volume and it makes listening to him a real trial. Perhaps the microphone was too closely placed, but if so, all that does is to exaggerate an unacceptable flaw in his singing. One must make allowance for the fact that he was a very late substitute – but that

applies only to the first of the two concerts from which this recording is taken. I didn't see Jim Pritchard's concert [review](#) before I acquired this set. However, I note that he felt at the time that this performance of *Gerontius* should not be preserved on disc and I can only agree. In fairness I should add that Jim clearly enjoyed Miss von Otter's performance more than I did.

Some time after I wrote these comments I heard a broadcast of a very fine performance that Sir Colin conducted in Dresden in March 2010, on Palm Sunday. I thought that this performance would probably never see the light of day on disc because it was marred by some irresponsible idiot in the audience who, unbelievably, briefly broke into loud applause as Groves finished the 'Sanctus fortis'. To my great delight, the performance was issued on CD in 2015 and the crass interruption had been edited out – presumably by splicing in a 'take' from the dress rehearsal. I think this performance better serves Sir Colin's reputation as an interpreter of *Gerontius* and I comment on it in more detail later in this survey.

Sakari Oramo, 2006

The most recent contender that I had to consider first time round was this Birmingham recording, released to coincide with the Elgar 150th birthday weekend celebrations in 2007. Sakari Oramo led his CBSO forces in a studio recording taped in Symphony Hall, Birmingham in August and September 2006 ([review](#)). Oramo's soloists were Justin Lavender, Jane Irwin and Peter Rose. On listening yet again for this survey I came to the conclusion that I'm reluctant to recommend this set, though that's a pity given the excellence of much of the enterprise. Both the playing and choral singing are superb and the recorded sound, which positively blossoms in the spacious acoustic of Symphony Hall, is very fine indeed. I like much of Sakari Oramo's conducting too, though I do part company with him over the choice of tempi in 'Praise to the Holiest'. Among the soloists Peter Rose is satisfactory and my admiration for Jane Irwin's assumption of the Angel has, if anything, increased on listening to the recording again. But I'm afraid the *Gerontius* of Justin Lavender is a major stumbling block for me. Even more than when I first heard the set, I miss any real sense that he truly understands the spirituality behind the role. His lack of sensitivity is highlighted by his inattentiveness to soft dynamic markings. I'm afraid he simply won't do. In the interests of balance, however, I ought to say that since I originally reviewed the set a very experienced critic, writing in another publication, has expressed the view that Lavender 'offers nobility, variety, intelligence and understanding of his difficult part: he is always 'inside' it.'

Recordings issued since 2007

Hans Swarowsky, 1960

Though this is an archive performance it wasn't released until 2008 so it will be more convenient to consider it here. Issued by the Elgar Society, it derives from an Austrian Radio recording. The performance is sung in the German translation by Julius Buths. This translation was made by Buths immediately after the Birmingham première, which he attended, in order for him to lead performances in Düsseldorf in 1901 and 1902. Elgar attended both performances and both he and the piece were warmly received. The translation is faithful and works very well.

The chief interest of this recording may lie in the presence of Julius Patzak singing the title role. Sadly, he's something of a disappointment. His commitment to the music is not in doubt and he sings with feeling. However, he was 62 at the time of making this recording and I'm afraid it shows. His tone is nasal - indeed, one might call it pinched. Furthermore, some of his notes sound insufficiently supported and often there's a definite tendency to sing notes on the flat side. Though he does convince as an elderly man *in extremis* during Part I, and despite his clear enunciation of the words throughout the performance I suspect he recorded the role ten years too late.

However, Ira Malaniuk is very convincing as the Angel. Her tone is rich and full and she sings the part with fine expression and understanding. I warmed to her performance right from the start. I also liked Ludwig Welter, who is an imposing Priest and also impresses as The Angel of the Agony. He has a fine, authoritative voice and he brings no little presence to both roles.

The choral singing is satisfactory but, frankly, no match for many of the other choirs on disc. The choir sings with commitment but the singing is very much of its time with rather excessive vibrato, which results in an insufficiently focussed sound. The orchestral playing is good, though the recorded sound favours the vocal soloists so orchestral detail is often obscured.

Hans Swarowsky, who I would not have associated with English music, conducts well. He seems to have the full measure of this score and an understanding of it. That's evident right from the start in a good account of the Prelude to Part I which inspires confidence that the conductor has empathy with the music. True, there are a few occasions when his tempi are too expansive but generally he follows Elgar's markings accurately and throughout the performance I felt that the *spirit* of the music was being conveyed both by him and by the other performers. In the last analysis that's what counts.

The sound itself, which originates from Austrian Radio tapes, is satisfactory: one must remember this was a radio production, never intended for commercial release. I suppose that this is a specialist issue. However, it's very well worth hearing, not least because it proves that Elgar's music 'travels'. I'd encourage all Elgar enthusiasts to listen to this set ([review](#)).

Sir Mark Elder 2008

I [thought](#) that Sir Mark Elder's 2005 reading at the Henry Wood Proms was something special (Seen and Heard [review](#)) and his subsequent studio recording does not disappoint. The American tenor, Paul Groves, is a most impressive Gerontius. Perhaps he was just a little more spontaneous in the 2005 live performance, which I'm sure I have read was his role debut, though one would not have known it. On the other hand, studio conditions and, no doubt, further experience in the role, enabled him to be more nuanced in 2008. He's equally successful in both Parts I and II and his is the best Gerontius of recent times and worthy to be ranked with the finest exponents on disc. Alice Coote is a fine Angel. She sings with feeling and commitment as well as musicality. Bryn Terfel is magisterial as the Priest and predictably imposing as the Angel of the Agony. The Hallé Choir and the Hallé Youth Choir (as the semi chorus) sing splendidly while the orchestral contribution from the Hallé is superb. The conducting of Sir Mark Elder is masterly in every way. His command of detail is extraordinary, as you can tell if you follow with a score, but equally memorable is his command of the Big Picture. His Elgar recordings prior to this one and since have shown he is arguably the leading Elgar conductor of our day and this *Gerontius* is one of the very best things he's done. As I said in my original [review](#) this is a remarkable achievement

Vladimir Ashkenazy, 2008

This is a recording taken from live performances given in Sydney in 2008 though it was not issued until 2012. Unfortunately, as I said in my [review](#), this is not a recommendable version. Mark Tucker, who sings Gerontius, sounds under strain in Part I though he fares somewhat better in Part II. The Finnish mezzo, Lilli Paasikivi, is the Angel. She sings with a very full, rich tone and that in itself offers no little pleasure. Unfortunately, however, what I miss in her performance is any real sense of identification with the text. The notes are all there but she doesn't seem to penetrate below the surface. David Wilson-Johnson, the third soloist, is much more satisfactory and the choir and orchestra both do well. I'm afraid that, overall, I'm unimpressed with Ashkenazy's conducting of the score, not least with several tempo selections which are significantly out of step with Elgar's very precise markings. He really offers little in the way of persuasive insights into the score and, in summary, this recording is very disappointing and simply can't match the best on the market.

Edo de Waart, 2013

This is a recording from a slightly unexpected but welcome source: Belgium. Edo de Waart conducts the Royal Flemish Philharmonic and the Collegium Vocale Ghent on a two-disc Pentatone release ([review](#)). This set has a lot going for it. De Waart conducts the score well and he obtains an excellent response from the orchestra. Those comments also apply to the uncommonly generous coupling: a good performance of the First Symphony. The choir, which is more usually heard in earlier music than this, offer arguably the finest choral singing in this work on disc to date. I'm sure the chorus is numerically smaller than we are accustomed to hearing but these are all professional singers – I suspect it was the first recording to feature a wholly professional choir – and the focus and precision of their singing brings great rewards. The only slight caveat is that the semi chorus isn't as differentiated – or distanced – as one would like. The recorded sound is very fine indeed. Peter Auty is in many ways an impressive Gerontius, though in Part I he doesn't suggest much of the frailty of a dying man. However, you'll go a long way to find a Gerontius whose voice is as clear and open-throated and his diction is crystal clear throughout. Overall, he's a good Gerontius though I've heard several – including Paul Groves, Philip Langridge, John Mitchinson and the incomparable Heddle Nash - who are more distinctive and who seem to me to penetrate to the heart of the matter more convincingly

The American baritone, John Hancock doesn't present a serious challenge to the best singers of the bass/baritone roles: he's better as the Angel of the Agony than as the Priest. The South African mezzo, Michelle Breedt, sings the Angel. Hers is a very full-toned voice, almost veering towards contralto in timbre, and her tone is somewhat covered at times. Initially I thought I was going to like her performance but reservations soon arise. Her heavily accented English is sometimes intrusive. More seriously, she frequently adopts an operatic style that I find quite at odds with the spirit of the music and, to make matters worse, quite often she breaks the line. She offers a good account of the Farewell but elsewhere I often listened in vain for evidence of a consoling or encouraging sentiment in her singing.

The main flaw – and a very serious one – is that in order to accommodate the symphony as well as *Gerontius* it's necessary to change discs part way through Part II. The break comes immediately after 'Praise to the Holiest'. Having to change discs at this point is a catastrophic distraction, unprecedented in my experience, and it's a very serious drawback to this set. It seems almost as if we've regressed to the 'bad old days' of LP side breaks.

Recordings issued since 2014**Sargent 1961**

The most recent addition to the catalogue (released in 2018) is also the earliest of these recently issued performances. It's a performance, given in November 1961 and broadcast by the BBC which Pristine Audio have issued for the first time on CD, I believe. The venue, Huddersfield Town Hall, is the same one where Sargent's two commercial recordings were made and, as in 1945 and 1954, he had the services of the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. The three soloists, Marjorie Thomas, Richard Lewis and John Cameron were the same singers who featured on his 1954 recording. As I commented in my [review](#) of the set there's a greater urgency at times in the 1961 performance, both in the singing of Richard Lewis and in Sargent's conducting. That's welcome. Less welcome is Lewis's often cavalier approach to note values.

Marjorie Thomas is an excellent Angel and John Cameron makes a very good job of both his solos. Choral and orchestral contributions are good, though the BBC microphones don't always report all the detail. However, Andrew Rose has done an excellent job with the transfers. Indeed, in some respects the Pristine sound is preferable to the EMI results: when I came to make comparisons, I found that the 1954 EMI recording is now starting to show its age in some respects; it seems a bit fuzzy. In any case, I'm not sure that the EMI version is currently available separately. The appeal of

this Pristine set is enhanced by the inclusion of a 1961 live performance of the Elgar Cello Concerto, also conducted by Sargent, in which the 17-year-old Jacqueline Du Pré is heard in what was her Proms debut. If you want a Sargent performance of *Gerontius* then the 1945 account with Heddle Nash remains *hors concours* but this 1961 traversal is well worth hearing.

Sir Adrian Boult 1968 (DVD)

This performance was filmed in Canterbury Cathedral under studio conditions by the BBC in March 1968. I suggested in my [review](#) that it may well have been shot in long takes because there are a few slips by the soloists, especially Peter Pears, which have been allowed to stand uncorrected. I referred to Boult's leadership of "an admirable, authoritative performance". Peter Pears sings the title role: this performance pre-dates his Decca audio recording with Britten. Much of what he does is good, especially in Part 2, but I don't care for his theatrical gestures; they are distracting. John Shirley-Quirk is excellent, especially as the Angel of the Agony.

As for Dame Janet Baker, I can only quote from my review of the set. "I've heard her audio recordings many times but I was completely unprepared for the extent to which I would be moved by not just hearing her but also by once again *seeing* her sing the role. She was 34 when she gave this performance and so we get the full flower of her understanding of the role allied with freshness of voice. She stands almost completely still and sings gloriously and with great intensity. She identifies completely with the words and with the music. I've been fortunate enough to hear a number of very fine mezzos in this role over the years but this performance reminds me why Dame Janet was – and is – an incomparable Angel." It has to be said that the choir isn't always ideally caught on the recording and, anyway, the sound is beginning to show its age. The orchestra comes through better. The video direction, by Brian Large, takes good advantage of the majestic surroundings of the location.

Sir Alexander Gibson 1976

I finally caught up with this recording in 2016, forty years after it was made in Motherwell Civic Centre. Gibson's conducting brings out the dramatic aspect of the music well but, as I commented in my [review](#), I felt that there were several passages in which he pressed the music with a bit too much urgency. Robert Tear sings well as Gerontius and Benjamin Luxon is successful as the Angel of the Agony though, for my taste, less so as the Priest. The orchestral and choral contributions are good – I described the singing of the Scottish National Chorus as "resilient and committed".

The chief merit of this set lies in the singing of Alfreda Hodgson. What a fine singer she was! Here she sings with great understanding and security. I don't think she puts a foot wrong and not only did I enjoy her performance, I was also moved by it. The set is worth hearing for the reminder it offers of this notable British singer. Incidentally, I have heard a performance which Miss Hodgson gave at the Proms - in 1970, I think - when *Gerontius* was sung by John Mitchinson and Sir Adrian Boult conducted. She was very fine on that occasion, too. It would be very good news if a way could be found to issue that performance commercially.

Yevgeny Svetlanov 1983

Back in 2014 all I could say of this recording was that I knew it had been issued in the past but I had never managed to hear it. That changed in 2015 when Melodiya made it available on CD as one of their 50th anniversary releases. The performance, recorded live in the Grand Hall of the Moscow Conservatory in April 1983, was an Anglo-Soviet affair. Svetlanov and the USSR State Symphony Orchestra were joined by British singers: the late Arthur Davies, Felicity Palmer, Norman Bailey and the London Symphony Chorus. This was, I believe, the work's Russian premiere.

Both Arthur Davies and Felicity Palmer offer a good deal to admire, though Davies isn't always as subtle as I'd like. You can hear both of them – and to better advantage - in the Hickox commercial recording discussed above. The LSO Chorus do an absolutely splendid job. The problem with this set

is the uneven conducting of Yevgeny Svetlanov. I discussed this in some detail in my full [review](#). I don't doubt the conductor's affection for the music but, on this evidence, he was insufficiently experienced in Elgarian style – it's noticeable, for example, that many of the tempo nuances, so scrupulously marked by Elgar in the score, are overlooked. It's an interesting performance to hear and it's good that it's available on CD, but it could never be a library choice.

Sir Colin Davis, Dresden 2010

I found Sir Colin Davis's 2005 LSO Live performance very disappointing. When I discussed it previously, I mentioned that I had heard on the radio a live performance given in Dresden in 2010. This seemed to me to be preferable in almost every way but I doubted if it would ever qualify for commercial issue, chiefly because a foolish member of the audience burst into applause as 'Sanctus fortis' came to an end. I was thrilled, therefore, when the Profil label issued this performance on CD in 2015 as a tribute by the Staatskapelle Dresden to Sir Colin, who had died in 2013. The disfiguring applause was gone – presumably some patching from the dress rehearsal had been possible. Sir Colin had the benefit of the Staatskapelle Dresden, an orchestra with which he had enjoyed a long association, and they play marvellously for him. The Staatsoperchor Dresden makes a notable contribution too.

There's an excellent trio of soloists. The Canadian bass, John Relyea sings both of his solos very well indeed. He's a dignified and firm-toned Priest and he brings an imposing presence to the role of The Angel of the Agony. Paul Groves sings Gerontius and I think that here he achieves greater spontaneity than was in case in the Elder studio recording of 2008. The Angel is Dame Sarah Connolly. At the time this concert was broadcast there was no studio recording involving her – though Chandos later put that right by casting her in Sir Andrew Davis's recording (see below). In Dresden she sang marvellously for Sir Colin, bringing out many expressive nuances in the score. I wouldn't wish to express a preference between this performance and her singing on the Andrew Davis recording; both are excellent.

Sir Colin conducts with great understanding and also with a fine dramatic sense. Some of his tempi are a little more urgent than we hear from many conductors but I am completely convinced by his way with the music throughout. To be truthful, I don't detect any significant interpretative differences between this performance and the 2005 LSO Live version. However, I prefer Profil's recorded sound and in every respect the Dresden team of soloists is better than the LSO Live trio. I have no hesitation in declaring this Dresden performance to be the preferred Colin Davis recording. My full review of the set is [here](#).

Sir Andrew Davis, 2014

Sir Andrew's 1997 DVD release, discussed above, had much to commend it but I was delighted that Chandos gave him the opportunity to make a studio recording in the year that we marked the 80th anniversary of Elgar's death. On this occasion Stuart Skelton, a noted operatic tenor, sang Gerontius. His reading of the role has been widely praised elsewhere and I also found much to admire. That said, I remain unsure that in Part One he conveys the sense of Gerontius as a man *in extremis* as convincingly as some other tenors on disc. However, as I said in my [full review](#) of the set, much of what he does is very good indeed and he convinces in Part Two. There's no doubt that he has the vocal amplitude that the big moments, such as 'Sanctus fortis', require.

Sarah Connolly is a first-class Angel, bringing very expressive and expertly controlled singing to the role. Her admirers may have regretted that it took so long for her to make a studio recording but it was worth the wait and, of course, she brought to this Chandos assignment considerable concert hall experience in the role. David Soar sings both his solos very well indeed. The BBC Symphony Chorus gives one of the best choral contributions on disc that I've heard, though there's a minor disappointment in that the semi chorus isn't as distanced as I'd have liked. In all other respects, though, the Chandos engineering is superb. The contribution of the BBC Symphony Orchestra is

consistently excellent. As for Sir Andrew Davis, the verdict in my original review was that he “has the complete measure of the score and his grasp of Elgarian style seems as instinctive as it is complete.” This is now a leading recommendation.

Daniel Barenboim, 2016

This recording was made live at two performances in the Philharmonie in Berlin, the first of which I attended to [review the concert](#) for Seen and Heard. In the run-up to the concert there were several changes to the line-up of soloists. Dame Sarah Connolly was indisposed and her place was taken by Catherine Wyn-Rogers. As for the title role, it was originally intended that Jonas Kaufmann would sing it but he withdrew, as did his replacement. Andrew Staples stepped in at very short notice – 48 hours, I believe – and did very well. In fact, the only soloist who survived from the originally announced roster was Thomas Hampson and, ironically, I was rather disappointed by his contributions.

There was no question of disappointment where Catherine Wyn-Rogers was concerned. As I mentioned when discussing the Vernon Handley recording, there were at the time some who felt her performance for Handley betrayed inexperience. Such an objection could not be raised in response to this Berlin performance. Her performance as the Angel is here full of maturity and sensitivity and we can only be glad that this fine artist got another chance to record the role on CD. I recall that at the end of the concert the soloists and conductor were all presented with bouquets. Barenboim detached a flower from his bouquet and presented it to Miss Wyn-Rogers, a courtly gesture that was amply justified by her performance. Andrew Staples may have been a short-notice replacement but no allowances need be made for that. His tone is clear and very focussed. His may not be the most opulent of voices but it’s well-suited to this role. He has sufficient heft for the big moments but he also shows great finesse in the passages that call for a lighter touch, such as the dialogue with the Angel in Part II.

The professional singers of the Staatsoperchor and RIAS Kammerchor sing superbly while the playing of the Staatskapelle Berlin is simply magnificent. They have a long and clearly close rapport with Daniel Barenboim and, my goodness, it shows. Barenboim’s conducting is very individual and some of his tempo selections will be controversial, I’m sure. However, it seems to me that everything he does is in response to the spirit of the music and it’s good to hear this score conducted by such a great musician who has clearly thought deeply about it and has reached his own, very musical, conclusions. My full review of the set is [here](#).

Summing up

Daniel Barenboim’s recording, released in 2017, 160 years after the composer’s birth, is the most recent addition to the *Gerontius* discography. The arrival of a few new recordings since the last iteration of this survey in 2014 has naturally caused me to think again about my previous recommendations of Barbirolli and Elder.

Does the ideal recording of *The Dream of Gerontius* exist? Is such a thing possible? The answer to both those questions must surely be in the negative for it’s highly unlikely that a performance of any work of art can achieve perfection. And in any event one person’s “ideal performance” will not strike another listener in the same way. But that’s not to diminish the achievements, both individual and collective, that are enshrined in several of the recordings discussed above. Indeed, among them all there are only a couple that I’d decline to recommend.

All the rest have much to commend them. Britten’s version has many penetrating insights, though Pears as Gerontius will not be to everyone’s taste. Boult’s EMI performance exudes authority but, as with the Britten version, he has a controversial tenor in the title role. Vernon Handley’s version is as authoritative as Boult’s and I’m much more attracted to both his Gerontius and his Angel than some

other commentators have been. In 2007 I expressed the view that of the modern versions the Rattle set was the best all-round choice. I now think that, for all its merits, Rattle's version must now yield to **Elder and Sir Andrew Davis**. Of the two, I think that Sir Mark Elder's recording has the edge, chiefly because in Paul Groves he has the better Gerontius.

Among the earlier recordings, choice lies between **Sargent** and **Barbirolli** in his 1964 EMI reading. In the case of Sargent, it has to be the 1945 version, despite the merits of both of his later traversals. In fact, I choose that Sargent version not so much for the conducting as for the soloists, and Heddle Nash especially. No Elgar enthusiast's collection should be without this performance: Nash is simply *hors concours*. However, for vision and inspirational conducting I keep coming back to 'Glorious John'. It's true that Kim Borg is a grievous disappointment – a terrible piece of miscasting. But Lewis is still a very considerable Gerontius, even when slightly indisposed, and in the young Janet Baker Barbirolli has an incomparable Angel. When you add to that a choir and orchestra that perform as if their very lives depended on it then you have a *Gerontius* that is still unsurpassed. I confess that it is this version that has always moved me the most and, surely, emotion as well as objective assessment is a major part of the evaluation of any musical performance.

I would not wish to confine myself to a single choice for this work. That's not a cop-out but, rather, a recognition that various interpreters bring different things to this score. So, my joint recommendation is that the **Elder and Barbirolli** recordings belong in any serious Elgar collection.

On the manuscript full score of *Gerontius* Elgar inscribed some lines from a poem by John Ruskin. The quotation begins 'This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved and hated, like another.' He also wrote to a friend that he had 'written my own heart's blood into the score.' Hearing music of such blazing conviction and originality, particularly in Barbirolli's warm hearted, dramatic and totally committed performance, who could doubt him?

John Quinn
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