<u>ORATORIO</u>

RTHK Radio 4 10:00 – 11:00 Programme 2 Sunday 13 May 2007

MUSIC: Elgar --- The Light of Life 97 R 02 ## 1 ff

KANE: V.O. on 0:22 (> c.0:42)

Hello again: this is 'Oratorio', and you're listening to the prelude to this week's work, "The Light of Life", by Edward Elgar, based on ch 9 of the Gospel of St John, about Jesus giving sight to a man born blind. Elgar called this prelude a "meditation", and it contains the oratorio's main *leitmotive*. [54 words]

V.O. on 1:10 (> c.2:10)

Oratorios, musical dramas, on all sorts of biblical and religious subjects were composed in the second half of 19th century Britain. Most of them are completely forgotten by now, no doubt to the posthumous pleasure of playwright and music-critic George Bernard Shaw who regularly expressed his vitriolic irritation at the genre . Any composer worth his salt *had* to produce one; and Elgar is recorded as saying, towards the end of his life, that writing oratorios was "the penalty of my English environment". But as the greatest English composer of his time, Elgar raised the standard, and has left a number of choral works that are still sung. But he never completed his proposed *trilogy* of New Testament oratorios, after finishing "The Apostles" and "The Kingdom". The oratorio-singing tradition itself, though, has persisted particularly in the English-speaking world. [138]

V.O. on 2:36 (> c.4:15)

Elgar's "The Light of Life" was billed as a 'short' oratorio when it was first performed in September 1896 in Worcester cathedral, England. The composer revised it for another performance there in 1899. But at just over an hour, it's too long to fit our present time-slot, so we'll be omitting some sections, which I'll mention as we go on. Elgar had asked an Anglican clergyman friend for suggestions for an oratorio for the Worcester festival, and *he* proposed the blind-man story: "Call it *Lux Christi* ...(he said) ...it's a perfect story, descriptive and dramatic". The publisher thought that a *latin* title for a work by a composer known to be Catholic mightn't go down too well at an Anglican cathedral festival --- and Elgar was quite happy with the publisher's suggested "The Light of Life". The libretto basically follows the gospel story, after opening with a choral hymn being sung in the temple, and the blind man outside praying for light. There's a solo aria for the blind man's mother, and a major choral meditation "Light out of darkness Thou hast brought". The oratorio's narrator is a contralto (Linda Finnie on this recording): the blind man is sung by tenor (Arthur Davies), a soprano (Judith Howarth) is the blind man's mother; and Jesus is sung by baritone (John Shirley-Quirk). The organist is John Scott, and The London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus are conducted by Richard Hickox. [237]

MUSIC: Elgar continue # 1 > # 6 end 25:01 KANE: This is Elgar's oratorio, The Light of Life, based on the gospel story of Jesus giving sight to a man born blind. The narrator now takes up the story again; and after a choral reflection, we'll hear part of the dialogue between the man himself and bystanders who first question his identity and then how is it he can now see. The man who was blind responds in a solo aria that's one of the high-points of the oratorio.

MUSIC: Elgar ## 7 -- 10 13:29 KANE: In ch 9 of St John's gospel, the formerly blind man is brought before the authorities (because this miracle had happened on the sabbath day). And there follows a dramatic interchange and a theological argument between bystanders, authority figures, the man born blind, and his parents, about the facts of the case and then about the legitimacy of the one who'd cured the man. In the end, the poor man is condemned for daring to suggest his benefactor must have come from God; and he's cast out of the synagogue. It was difficult to choose what to *omit* for this programme; but in the end, reluctantly, this section is where the cut fell. So, we move on to the point where Jesus finds the man again, and faces him with the *meaning* of the "sign" he'd experienced: his faith.

2

MUSIC: Elgar ## 15 – 16

KANE: True to the *expectations* (if not the conventions) of English Victorian oratorios, Edward Elgar's "The Light of Life" ends with a massive rousing chorus, trumpets and organ and all : 'Light of the World, we know Thy praise'. This is a quintessentially *English* version of *oratorio*, which had begun in Italy some 300 years earlier, as rather simple musical religious drama, in the oratory chapel of St Philip Neri.

MUSIC: Elgar #17

4:56

Music 50:22 Words: 297 (exclud. Voice-over = 429)