

# ORATORIO again

RTHK Radio 4  
10:00 – 11:00

Programme 8  
Sunday 25 January 2009

**MUSIC:** Elgar: Dream of Gerontius CD 6042 disc 1 #1 fade in at 3:05

**KANE:** V.O. at c. 3:25

The music is from the Prelude to Edward Elgar's "The Dream of Gerontius": the programme is "Oratorio": and I'm Ciaran Kane. My presentation this week is not *strictly* an oratorio at all, and its composer certainly never wanted it *called* such. It's actually a setting of a long poem by the distinguished 19<sup>th</sup> century English churchman, Cardinal John Henry Newman. *He* was one of the leading lights of the mid-century Oxford Movement, became a Catholic priest, and introduced into England, in Birmingham and London, the Oratorian community --- the group established by St Philip Neri in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century from which the very *name* 'oratorio' derives. **[music out !]** Newman's poem, "The Dream of Gerontius" was published in 1865, and has been described as "the best-known literary work on the subject of death and the future life ... published during the Victorian age". It reflects its *time*, in its theology and the popular Catholic devotion it portrays. But it had a wide audience *beyond* the confessional lines of the day. The poem is a dramatic narrative, in seven sections, of some 900 lines that move between blank-verse and set verses, which include the *hymn* "Praise to the Holiest" Newman had written separately. The author *himself* felt that his dramatic poem *should* be set to music. And in fact that was suggested to Dvorak some years later. *Elgar* only got to know the poem in the late 1880s, not too long before Newman died, and mulled over it for a *number* of years before finally writing his masterpiece for the Birmingham Choral Festival of 1900. Elgar's setting of "The Dream of Gerontius" has been called his "third opera", likening it to an *opera* based on Newman's poem as libretto. Part 1 corresponds to the first *section* of the poem, the scene of the dying Gerontius knowing his end is near, and surrounded by friends and the priest leading the prayers for the dying. Elgar telescopes the rest of the poem into Part 2, focussing on the soul of Gerontius being taken

into the presence of God. In this *reduced* presentation of the work, I'm starting just after the prelude, as the old man, 'Gerontius', knowing he's near to death prays to Jesus and Mary, and asks his friends to pray for him too. [ 385 ]

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e disc 1 ##2, 3 5:47**

**KANE:** Gerontius and those standing around him continue to pray for his deliverance, in prayers that profess his faith and invoke the power of Christ's passion, and the memory of God's interventions for the patriarchs of the Old Testament. Wearing by his pain, Gerontius wants only to sleep, recognising his last hour, "novissima hora est"; and he prays, "Into thy hands O Lord". The priest and those around commend his soul to God, "Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul, go in the name of God the Father who created you, go in the name of all the angels and saints..." [ 100 ]

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e disc 1 # 9 quick fade-in at 0:37 1:31  
## 10, 11 6:21**

**KANE:** Part 2 begins with an orchestral prelude and then the soul of Gerontius singing "I went to sleep and now I am refreshed.... I hear no more the busy beat of time". He feels carried along --- it is his *angel* whose work is now done, carrying him on his way to heaven. [ 53 ]

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e disc 1 # 12 quick fade-in at 2:20  
# 13 quick fade-out at 2:40  
timing 6:25**

**KANE:** Gerontius and his angel guardian greet each other and speak together. He has many questions. As they near the judgement-court, Gerontius hears a fierce hubbub, a sour and uncouth dissonance. His angel tells him it's the sullen howl of demons, hungry and wild, eager for a last chance to snatch a soul away. There are *two* demon choruses at this point in Elgar's "The Dream of Gerontius", but the old man cannot see them. [ 74 ]

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e disc 1 # 17 NB start !! at 0:005! 2:20**

**KANE:** In Newman's poem, successive choirs of angels, cherubim, seraphim, archangels sing the praise of God: Elgar amalgamates them into the choir of angelicals singing Newman's hymn, "Praise to the Holiest", as Gerontius' angel explains to him their progress towards the presence of God. [ 43 ]

