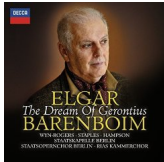


Edward Elgar - The Dream of Gerontius (2017)

Written by bluesever

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The Dream of Gerontius, Op.38 / Pt. 1 1.*Prelude* 2.*Jesu, Maria, I am near to death* 3.*Kyrie eleison* 4.*Rouse thee, my fainting soul* 5.*Be merciful, be gracious* 6.*Sanctus fortis, Sanctus Deus* 7.*I can no more; for now it comes again* 8.*Rescue him, O Lord* 9.*Novissima hora est* 10.*Proficiscere, anima Christiana* 11.*Go, in the name of Angels and Archangels*

The Dream of Gerontius, Op.38 / Pt. 2

12.*Introduction* 13.*I went to sleep* 14.*My work is done, my task is o'er* 15.*Low-born clods of brute earth* 16.*The mind bold and independent* 17.*I see not those false spirits* 18.*Praise to the Holiest* 19.*Glory to him* 20.*But hark! A grand mysterious harmony* 21.*And now the threshold as we traverse it* 22.*Praise to the Holiest in the height* 23.*Thy judgement now is near* 24.*Jesu! by that shuddering dread which fell on Thee* 25.*Praise to His name!* 26.*Take me away!* 27.*Lord, Thou hast been our refuge* 28.*Softly and gently, dearly ransomed soul*

Catherine Wyn-Rogers (mezzo-soprano – The Angel) Andrew Staples (tenor - Gerontius) Thomas Hampson (baritone – The Priest/The Angel of the Agony) Staatsoperchor RIAS Kammerchor Konzertchor und Jugendchor der Staatsoper Unter den Linden Staatskapelle Berlin Daniel Barenboim – conductor rec. live, 19 & 20 September 2016, Philharmonie, Berlin.

This recording of The Dream of Gerontius was made at two performances in Berlin last September. I had the good fortune to attend the first of them to review the concert for Seen and Heard. As I mentioned in that review, there were a number of changes to the roster of soloists that that had been originally announced. One of these was the absence of Jonas Kaufmann who was scheduled to sing the title role; he was compelled to withdraw due to the indisposition that prevented him from singing for the second half of 2016. Notwithstanding all the changes of soloists I still heard a memorable account of Elgar's masterpiece that evening so I was delighted to receive these discs for review. Incidentally, I have studiously avoided re-reading my concert review because I wanted to approach the recording as independently as possible, not least because what one hears on disc is likely to be rather different, for example in terms of balance, to what one experiences live in the hall.

Andrew Staples was engaged at short notice to replace another ailing colleague who was to have been Kaufmann's replacement. I don't know how much time Staples and Barenboim had for rehearsal but I don't recall any hints of 'last-minute' on the night and that's certainly not the case on disc. Staples' 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 such as 'Sanctus fortis' and 'Take me away' 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. For obvious reasons I couldn't follow the live performance in my score but doing so now, while listening to the CDs, I admired Staples' great accuracy. Not only is he most attentive to Elgar's copious dynamic markings but he's also pretty scrupulous about note values, not least in sustaining notes to their full value at the ends of phrases. It sounds like a small point but many singers don't always do that. His is a reading of great intelligence: he clearly understands the text and he enunciates it with great clarity.

His first entry, 'Jesu, Maria, I am near to death', is very well inflected but he catches the change of mood to resolution at 'Rouse thee, my fainting soul'. 'Sanctus, fortis' is impressively done. Barenboim introduces a good deal of rubato to enhance the expressive singing of his soloist. I admire the attention to matters of dynamic detail that Andrew Staples brings – such as at 'Father, Son and Holy Ghost'. I like very much his plangent and expressive delivery at 'Novissima hora est'. This is one example of a passage where, arguably, Paul Groves achieves even greater expression and inwardness on the Mark Elder recording (review). However, it must be remembered not only that Groves was working under studio conditions but also that he had had more notice of the assignment – and had sung the role for Elder before. Staples' contribution to Part II is just as distinguished. He conveys a sense of wonderment in the first few minutes and his engagement with the Angel is a genuine dialogue. I admire very much his account of 'Take me away'. Here Barenboim shapes the music in long, expressive phrases, adopting a broad tempo. That must have been taxing for Staples at the end of the evening but it doesn't show. Overall I think his performance represents a considerable achievement and I'm very glad that it's been preserved on disc.

Catherine Wyn-Rogers has already recorded the role of the Angel; she took part in the January 1993 recording conducted by Vernon Handley. When that recording was reissued some years ago I made this comment in my review: "When the recording first appeared the distinguished critic, Alan Blyth, writing in Gramophone was one who was critical of Catherine Wyn-Rogers. I have to say that I disagreed with this view and, broadly I still do, though on reflection I think I see what Blyth was getting at. Where he heard nerves and an as-yet incomplete interpretation I hear a simple, straightforward delivery of the text and the notes. However, I'm not sure that Wyn-Rogers quite conveys the full range of emotion required for the Angel." Listening once more to that recording and comparing it to the new version I can now hear what commentators such as Alan Blyth felt was missing. I still admire much about the earlier performance – not least the freshness of the voice – but this 2016 performance is in a completely different league.

With the benefit of another 23 years' experience behind her Miss Wyn-Rogers brings great maturity and sensitivity to her interpretation. The sound of the voice itself gives great pleasure and in terms of role assumption she now far surpasses her younger self. I'm so glad that this fine artist got a second chance at recording *Gerontius*. No doubt encouraged by the presence on the rostrum of such a great and supportive conductor as Barenboim, she seems liberated and she brings great feeling and many subtle nuances to the music. It helps too that her voice sounds more immediate on this new recording: in 1993 her singing rather echoed round a presumably empty Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool. For Barenboim she sings 'A presage falls upon thee' radiantly, the music generously phrased by Barenboim. Later she brings wonderful eloquence to 'There was a mortal' although I do wonder if in this episode she's perhaps just a fraction too emphatic in her delivery of 'Such that the Master's very wounds'. The celebrated Farewell is very moving. Barenboim adopts a significantly broader tempo than Handley did and Miss Wyn-Rogers responds to this expansive approach with singing that is dedicated and wonderfully consoling. I've enjoyed hearing her sing many times both live and on disc but I don't think I've heard her do anything better than this committed and eloquent performance. I remember that at the end of the performance I attended, after the conductor and soloists had been presented with bouquets Barenboim took one flower from his own bouquet and presented it to Miss Wyn-Rogers. It was a lovely gesture and re-hearing her performance now it's one that I don't find at all surprising.

Thomas Hampson was the sole survivor of the originally-announced cast of soloists. He is a singer who I've long admired but I have to say I was slightly underwhelmed by his contribution, especially as the Priest. The other two soloists were placed in the conventional position by the conductor's rostrum but Hampson's place was behind the orchestra, immediately in front of the chorus and right in the centre of the platform. Actually, this is quite a fitting arrangement, at least for the first solo, since the Priest is leading the chorus in their intercessions for the Soul of *Gerontius*. However, this positioning meant that Hampson had to project his voice over quite a distance – though no further than would be the case in the opera house. He's imposing as the Priest but I find him a bit too forceful for my taste: one has the impression that the Soul of *Gerontius* is being sent on its way emphatically. On the Elder set Bryn Terfel is similarly big-voiced but I hear rather more light and shade in his delivery. Also in this solo, more than in his second solo, I found some of Hampson's pronunciation distinctly odd given that he's an Anglophone singer. I can only assume this is connected to the vowels he's using. He's better as the Angel of the Agony for which a big imposing style is even more appropriate. In this solo he's commanding when called for but also expressive.

Barenboim had a professional chorus at his disposal and it shows. The choir sings the English words very well; one is aware at times that this is not an Anglophone group but not to any degree that matters. What does matter is the responsiveness and incisiveness of their singing. As one would expect from professionals, they're highly attentive to dynamics – 'Holy Mary, pray

for me' in Part I is just the earliest example of this. I appreciate the fervour of their attack at 'Rescue him' and they're absolutely splendid in the closing chorus of Part I. They're very dynamic – as is the orchestra – in the Demons' Chorus and very incisive in the fugal section 'Dispossessed', a passage that Barenboim takes at a surprisingly steady pace. I like the pure sound of the women's voices as the Angelicals - all the voice parts register clearly. The build-up to 'Praise to the Holiest' is fervently done and the start of the chorus itself is a thrilling moment; thereafter the choir's attention to detail, not least in matters of dynamics, ensures that the following pages don't flag.

The playing of the Staatskapelle Berlin impressed me greatly on the night. Now that I have the chance to savour it on CD my admiration is even greater. The corporate sound is richly hued and very satisfying to hear. The orchestra is also supple and flexible, qualities that are vital in Elgar. And when necessary they can turn on the power too. I'm sure it helps that they've played Elgar's music before with Barenboim – the quality of the playing on their recordings of the two symphonies is superb (review). Here the orchestral playing is as fine as I can recall hearing in a recording of Gerontius.

Daniel Barenboim's conducting of the score is most interesting. I don't agree with everything he does but overall I find him very convincing. He is by no means afraid to adopt an expansive tempo when he feels that the music calls for it. At the very start of the work, for example, the metronome marking in the score is crotchet = 60. Barenboim is significantly slower than that – he's closer to 40 beats to the minute. That said, Sir Mark Elder is only a fraction quicker and in any case I don't think it matters. What does matter is that Barenboim – and Elder also – establishes a sense of mystery right from the start. Moreover, the slow speed notwithstanding, there's tension in the air from the outset.

Though his speeds may be broad at times – and perhaps broader than a good number of the other conductors who have recorded the work - Barenboim seems to me to convey extremely well the spirit of the music. Sometimes I was mildly disconcerted by a speed which is a bit more expansive than I'm accustomed to hearing but on almost every one of these occasions Barenboim convinces. In any case, whenever Barenboim's pacing of the work was a bit different to what I'm used to hearing he made me think about the music and that's an entirely good thing. Only once do I part company with him: when he pulls back the speed very significantly on three occasions early on in the Demons' Chorus. The second and third of those are marked in the vocal score but I've never experienced the brakes being applied so strongly. For me it impedes the urgency of the music and I think it was a miscalculation by this masterly conductor. Otherwise, however, I think his direction is sure footed and that his deeply felt interpretation is clearly the result of careful thought about the work and about Elgar style: one would expect nothing less from this great musician.. It's perhaps no coincidence that he – like Elder – is such a fine operatic conductor for this is a performance that certainly brings out the drama of Elgar's

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score.

The Decca recording is very good. The wide dynamic range achieved by the performers has been faithfully represented. There's plenty of body to the sound and detail registers very well.

The Dream of Gerontius has been lucky on disc and there are already a number of notable recordings. This deeply considered and superbly performed account is worthy to rank with the finest. ---John Quinn, musicweb-international.com

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