CBSO

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra

The Dream of Gerontius
Symphony Hall
Wednesday 17 September 2025, 7:30pm

CBSO.CO.UK

Programme £4

This concert is presented in association with DLA Piper

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KAZUKI CONDUCTS THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS

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Kazuki Yamada
Music Director

INTRODUCTION

I am really looking forward to tonight's concert! I have missed the orchestra and audiences over the summer break, so it is wonderful to meet each other again to open the 2025-26 season with Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius.

This piece was premiered in Birmingham 125 years ago, in 1900, at the Birmingham Music Festival, before the CBSO had even been born. Tonight will be my first time conducting the piece and it feels like such an honour to perform a piece deeply rooted in the city.

The religious background to the story is incredibly fascinating to me. The music presents how we view our life and death and asks the simple question: From where do we go? How are we presented in front of God?

It is a dramatic story which I find very interesting, especially in the moments where Gerontius is so modestly pleading with God. Elgar wasn't too well known at the time of its premiere; this was one of his debut pieces but already you begin to see the great elements of his future music foreshadowed in this work.

Do try and listen out for the main leitmotif Elgar uses throughout the piece – it's a great way to follow the music as you hear the melodic theme return, often changing depending on the scene and the characters on stage, as well as reflecting the shifting emotions.

We perform the work with three fantastic soloists: Jess Dandy, Roderick Williams and Benjamin Hulett. The CBSO Chorus always sound amazing, and I can't wait to work with them again too – they play an important role in the piece by representing the human connection between the characters. The vocalists also sing in Old English – it has a lot of connections with the German language which I believe adds beautiful depth.

This is a monumental piece by Elgar and I know will make a brilliant start to the season.

Please note that texts and movement titles will be delivered by surtitles for this concert.

Elgar, The Dream of Gerontius, Op. 38, 95mins

Part I:
I. Prelude
II. Jesu, Maria – I am near to death
III. Rouse thee, my fainting soul
IV. Sanctus fortis, sanctus Deus
V. Proficiscere, anima Christiana

Part II:
I. I went to sleep
II. It is a member of that family
III. But hark! upon my sense comes a fierce hubbub
IV. I see not those false spirits
V. But hark! a grand mysterious harmony
VI. Thy judgment now is near
VII. I go before my judge
VIII. Softly and gently, dearly-ransomed soul

There will be no interval for this performance.

Kazuki Yamada, Conductor
Jess Dandy, Contralto
Benjamin Hulett, Tenor
Roderick Williams, Baritone
Simon Halsey, Chorus Director
CBSO Chorus

This concert is generously supported by Chris and Jane Loughran.

THANK YOU, SIMON HALSEY

Tonight marks Simon Halsey's last concert as Director of the CBSO Choruses, a role he has held since 1982. There are many moments over the next few seasons where we're looking forward to continuing to work with Simon, but tonight it felt important to say a huge thank you from everyone at the CBSO!

FREE PRE-CONCERT TALK

Catherine Arlidge, the CBSO's Director of Artistic Planning, sits down with Music Director Kazuki Yamada for an exclusive insight into the music in this evening's concert and in the 2025-26 season. Join us for this free and unticketed talk from 6:30pm in the Jennifer Blackwell Performance Space.

BBC RADIO 3

This performance will be recorded for broadcast at a later date. Listen back on BBC Radio 3 on Monday 22 September at 7:30pm.

We are happy for you to take photos and short videos at our concerts during applause breaks. We ask that you are mindful of disturbing artists and other audience members. Please dim the brightness on your phone, and do not use your flash.

We also regularly take photographs for promotional use, so you may see a professional photographer at our concerts. Please ask a member of the front of house team if you have any questions about this.

To ensure that everyone is able to enjoy the performance, please make sure your mobile phone is set to silent.

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SCC

Wednesday 17 September 2025
Symphony Hall, Birmingham

KAZUKI CONDUCTS THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS

Kazuki Yamada leads the CBSO Chorus and a glorious trio of soloists (Jess Dandy, Benjamin Hulett and Roderick Williams) in Elgar's profound and touching Dream of Gerontius. It's very much a homecoming for this mighty oratorio, which was first performed in Birmingham in 1900. It has since become a cherished British work, touching and terrifying by turn and with one of the most beautiful 'farewells' in classical music history. Expect to be deeply moved.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS, OP.38

The Dream

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

That didn't prevent John Henry Newman's poem *The Dream of Gerontius* from becoming a bestseller upon its publication in 1864. In a century of fast-moving social and technological change, spiritual questions had taken on a fierce urgency and Newman – the theologian, poet and priest whose high-profile conversion to Roman Catholicism had been the sensation of the age – was uniquely placed to answer them. Catholics had been denied full civil rights in the UK as recently as 1829, and many tenets of the faith seemed alien and confusing to English-speaking converts. Newman set out to explain them in poetry, using glowing words and emotionally-charged images to speak directly to his readers. When, in 1879, he was made a Cardinal, he took as his motto *Cor ad Cor loquitur* – "Heart speaks to heart".

Newman's words certainly spoke to the heart of Edward Elgar. As a Catholic and a Midlander, Elgar was intensely aware of the Oratory on Hagley Road in Birmingham that Newman had founded in 1849, and

"Throughout the early months of 1900 we simply lived *Gerontius*" recalled his violin pupil Rosa Burley. "We talked of little else on our walks and Edward seemed to think of nothing else".

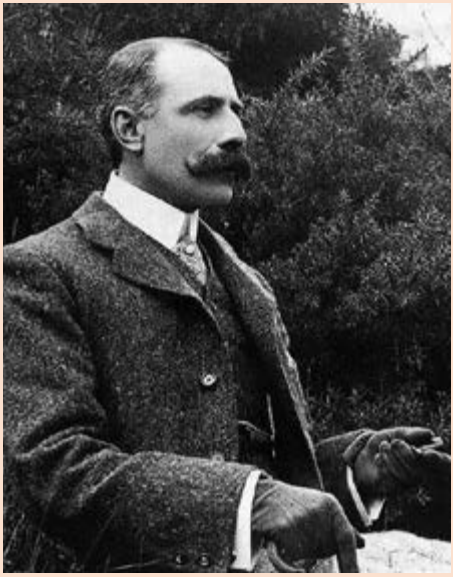
(later) Newman's burial at Rednal in the Lickey Hills. He had owned a copy of *The Dream of Gerontius* since at least 1885 (he received another as a wedding present in 1889), and made copious notes, with a view to a musical setting. Elgar wasn't alone: in 1888, the committee of the Birmingham Triennial Festival had suggested to Antonín Dvořák that he might like to set *The Dream of Gerontius* to music (Dvořák composed a Requiem instead). So at New Year 1900, when they approached Elgar with the same idea, he was already primed to respond, and on 12 January he visited the Oratory to ask permission to abridge the poem. The Festival would take place in October that year.

The Wind Among the Pines

Elgar worked at fever-heat in his rented cottage at Birchwood Lodge near Storridge – trimming Newman's verses, and picking out the passages that moved him most powerfully. And then came the music. "Throughout the early months of 1900 we simply lived *Gerontius*" recalled his violin pupil Rosa Burley. "We talked of little else on our walks and Edward seemed to think of nothing else". As work progressed, Elgar sent excerpts to his editor Augustus Jaeger in London – his most trusted musical friend, whom he had immortalised as Nimrod in the *Enigma Variations* the previous year. "I am half undone" exclaimed Jaeger, after studying the score. "Those poignant melodies, those beautiful heart-piercing harmonies!"

Jaeger sensed that Elgar was opening a new chapter: a work that drew on all his reserves of faith and imagination, as well as a deep knowledge of Wagner and decades of experience writing large-scale choral music. This was a long way from the kind of solid, respectable oratorio that had dominated the Triennial Festival since the premiere of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in 1846. It's more personal (and infinitely more passionate) than that: a spiritual drama rather than an act of worship. Gerontius, said Elgar to Jaeger, is "a man like us, not a Priest or a Saint, but a *sinner*, a repentant one of course but still no end a *worldly* man in his life, and now brought to book. Therefore I've not filled *his* part with Church tunes and rubbish but a good, healthy full-blooded Romantic, remembered worldliness".

And something more than that, too. For Gerontius, the singing of the heavenly hosts is like "the summer wind, among the lofty pines". Elgar used a large orchestra and his vision of heaven glows with a light, and an atmosphere, that will be recognisable to anyone who has stood on a summer evening and looked westward from the Malverns, the Lickeys or the Clent Hills. Yet still, Jaeger urged him higher. At the climax of the whole drama, as Gerontius's soul approaches the seat of Judgement, Elgar initially declined to portray the actual presence of the Almighty. Jaeger pleaded,



EDWARD ELGAR, LIKELY IN THE EARLY 1900S.
JROCKLEY, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

cajoled, and finally taunted him into meeting the challenge: "It wanted a Wagner or a R.Strauss to do that, nobody else would dare attempt it".

Without a word, Elgar returned to the nearly-completed manuscript and added the blinding flash of sound that no-one who hears *The Dream of Gerontius* ever forgets. On 3 August 1900 he signed and dated the completed score, with the dedication A.M.D.G. (To the greater glory of God). The premiere was set for the morning of Wednesday 3 October, in Birmingham Town Hall.

The Best of Me

To say that the first performance disappointed Elgar is an understatement. Many reasons have been ascribed: a late change in chorus-master, an impossibly busy rehearsal schedule (normal for the Triennial Festival); the simple fact that the newly-printed scores were full of errors – and that even today, eight weeks would be a dangerously short rehearsal period to learn a new work as complex as *The Dream of Gerontius.* It's also true that Elgar was a born pessimist, prone to mood-swings. "As far as I'm concerned music in England is dead" he complained, bitterly, as the disappointment sank in. A more general readiness to think the worst of Birmingham – then, as now – explains much subsequent commentary.

In fact, by most standards the premiere was a triumph – with a cheering audience and critics who, overwhelmingly, saw past the choral mishaps to hail the birth of a masterpiece. "This has been a great day, for it has witnessed the production of a remarkable work" wrote one critic, adding that "there can be no doubt of this, that it is the most powerful and profound utterance of one of the most individual composers". Within months, *The Dream of Gerontius* was being performed across the English-speaking world and even - as *Der Traume des Gerontius* - in Germany where (after a performance in Dusseldorf in May 1902) Germany's greatest living composer Richard Strauss led a toast to "the first English progressive, Meister Edward Elgar".

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

"This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved and hated, like another: my life was as the vapour and is not; but this I saw and knew; this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory."

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Conductor

KAZUKI YAMADA

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Kazuki Yamada is Music Director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Yamada is also Artistic and Music Director of Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo and from 2026/2027, Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin. Time spent with Seiji Ozawa underlines the importance of Yamada's "Japanese feeling" for music. Born in Kanagawa, Japan, he continues to work and perform in Japan every season. The current season begins at the BBC Proms with CBSO, followed by returning to Tanglewood Festival with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He recently took the CBSO on tour to Japan and in March 2026 they embark on a European tour. Following his debut with the Berlin Philharmoniker he makes debuts with the Bamberger Symphoniker, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester, Rotterdam Philharmonic and Wiener Symphoniker. Yamada appears annually as a guest artist at the Seiji Ozawa International Academy Switzerland and is strongly committed to the outreach programme at CBSO. Yamada studied music at the Tokyo University of the Arts and first achieved international attention upon receiving first prize in the 51st Besançon International Competition for young conductors in 2009.

JESS DANDY

Cumbrian born Jess Dandy is widely regarded as the foremost British contralto of her generation. She studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, and trained at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, where she is now a Fellow. In the 2025/26 season, Jess makes house debuts at the Salzburg Easter Festival as Floßhilde Das Rheingold, at the Bayerische Staatsoper as Lady Toodle Die Englische Katze, and later in the summer at The Grange Festival. Recent highlights include her return to the BBC Proms for Stravinsky's Requiem Canticles, Berlioz's Roméo et Juliette with the Bergen Philharmonic, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Boston Symphony and the Oxford International Song Festival with Keval Shah for the programme Eternity in an Hour.
In 2021, Jess was shortlisted for a Royal Philharmonic Society Award in the category of Young Artist. She is the co-founder of SongPath, a mental health initiative creating musical walking trails in nature for better mental health. With composer Alex Mills, she developed the Music & Being Collective, an open laboratory space exploring music and our sense of self through interdisciplinary dialogue.

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Tenor

BENJAMIN HULETT

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Benjamin Hulett studied at New College, Oxford and at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Highlights in 25/26 include three Handel operas: Vitaliano in *Giustino* for the Royal Ballet & Opera's Linbury Theatre; Abner, Amalekite, Doeg & High Priest in *Saul* for Oper Köln and Bajazet in Tamerlano for the London Handel Festival. He will also return to Garsington Opera as Giove & Anfinomo in Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria.* Previous engagements have included roles for the Royal Ballet & Opera; the Hamburgische Staatsoper; Bayerische Staatsoper; Deutsche Staatsoper; Theater an der Wien; Opéra de Lille, Opéra National de Lyon, the Teatro Real in Madrid and at the Glyndebourne, Salzburg, Edinburgh and Baden-Baden Festivals. His concert appearances include the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Boston Symphony Orchestras under Charles Dutoit; the Montreal Symphony Orchestra under Kent Nagano; Salzburg Mozartwoche under Ivor Bolton; Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment under John Wilson and the Berliner Philharmoniker under Sir Simon Rattle, Sir Roger Norrington, Emmanuelle Haïm, Trevor Pinnock, and Vladimir Jurowski. His recordings have received nominations and awards from BBC Music Magazine, Gramophone, Grammys, L'Orfée d'Or and Diapason.

Baritone

RODERICK WILLIAMS

Roderick Williams is one of the most sought-after baritones of his generation and enjoys relationships with all the major UK and European opera houses. He has sung world premieres of operas by, among others, David Sawer, Sally Beamish, Michael van der Aa, Robert Saxton and Alexander Knaifel as well as roles by Mozart, Britten and Strauss. He has performed concert repertoire with many of the leading orchestras and ensembles internationally including the Berlin and New York Philharmonic Orchestras, London Symphony Orchestra and all of the BBC Orchestras. In demand as a recitalist, he has performed at major venues worldwide and festival appearances have included BBC Proms (Last Night 2014), Edinburgh, Cheltenham, Aldeburgh and Melbourne. In 2016 he won the RPS Singer award and the prize for best choral composition at the British Composer Awards. He was awarded the OBE for services to music in 2017 and was one of the featured soloists at the coronation of King Charles III in 2023.

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Credits correct as of
15 September 2025

THE ORIGINS OF THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS

Laurence Johnstone offers some insight into the wonderful origin of The Dream of Gerontius. As the great-grandson of George Hope Johnson, who commissioned the work, Laurence shares his personal connection to the piece.

The Dream of Gerontius became one of Edward Elgar's most celebrated works, but few know that he hesitated at first—until George Hope Johnstone, an influential character in City of Birmingham circles, persuaded him to bring it to life.

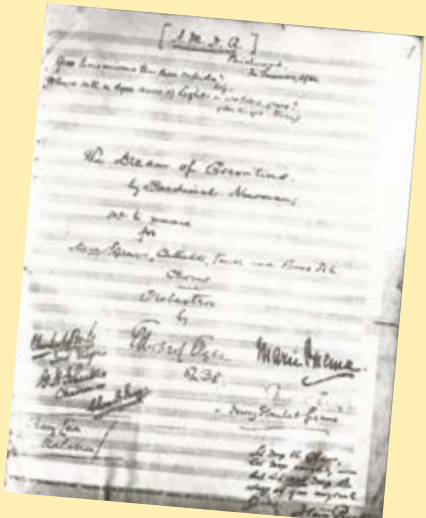
Johnstone was a prominent civic leader and businessman in Birmingham, deeply involved in the city's musical life. As Chairman of the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival from 1879, he persuaded Elgar to compose The Dream of Gerontius for the Festival's 1900 season. Beyond securing the commission, Johnstone negotiated Elgar's royalties with Novello, ensuring that the composer's rights were protected.

The first performance at the Town Hall in October 1900 was famously a near disaster: the forces assembled, including conductor Hans Richter, soloists and choir, were inadequately prepared. But successful performances followed in Düsseldorf (December 1901) and at Westminster Cathedral (June 1903). Gerontius emerged as one of Elgar's choral masterpieces.

Subsequently, Johnstone commissioned for the Festival Elgar's The Apostles and The Kingdom.

Johnstone's vital role in championing the work and the composer cemented its enduring legacy. Without his advocacy and negotiation, the oratorio might not have gained the recognition it enjoys today as a landmark in British choral music.

George Hope Johnstone's three great-grandsons, who were all born and brought up in Birmingham, are in the audience for tonight's performance.



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