

# 'GERONTIUS' AN INSPIRING CLIMAX TO G.P.O. SEASON

THE "Dream of Gerontius," by Elgar, brought the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra's season to a spiritual close at the Civic Hall on Saturday.

The dreams of man, for here and hereafter, have absorbed and inspired poets from Bunyan and Keats to Cardinal Newman and it was Newman who wrote Gerontius. Elgar composed his masterpiece in 1900 and when it was done, he declared "This is the best of me . . ."

The oratorio is really beyond emotion and experience. So how should it best be tackled? Not as melodramatic music, yet with sufficient human feeling and perhaps passion to show that Gerontius is "a man like us."

Like any such work involving large forces, the overall effect depends on its constituents —

conductor, orchestra, choir, soloists, even setting. Vernon Handley seemed to be affected most authentically by the score and structured its developing drama with an inner profundity, and assurance, focusing, securing, the position and prominence of each cornerstone, each column, in this cathedral-like edifice.

The G.P.O. and Philharmonic Choir responded to his approach of reflective inexorability: like the philosophy in its whole theme of life, death and rebirth. From the first orchestral pages were emitted those strangulated string cries so poignantly Elgarian. It is in Elgar that one is often reminded of Mr. Handley's earlier affinities to Sir Adrian Boult.

Care was applied not to drown the soloists, evident in such passages as the early muted accompaniment to Gerontius. Gerald English was the tenor singing Gerontius and one of his best qualities was meticulous articulation in any number of places: "Be with me, Lord, in my extremity," for instance, and even when singing softly: "And I would fain sleep."

His was an impeccable interpretation in one sense, yet one returns to the need for passion in this experience, which may have been felt inwardly yet was not fully conveyed externally. One felt his voice evoked Benjamin Britten more than Elgar.

In contrast, the operatic background of the bass, Thomas Allen, served to add warmth to an unwavering vocal line. Although his was the least role quantitatively of the three soloists, he was perhaps the best of them qualitatively. The young contralto, Fiona Kimm, was singing the Angel and yielded considerable promise. Yet a lack of sheer power detracted from the performance at the receiving end — which is the important place after all.

Elgar never aimed at an all-enveloping sound for sound's sake here, and Mr. Handley, with the G.P.O., led by Hugh Bean, brought out all the more the splashes like the strings / trombone / tympani outburst following soon after the "Miserere."

The Philharmonic Choir had some fine moments, in the "dispossessed," "hubbub," and "generous heart" sequences among others. While the orchestra rose to their climaxes like the one leading on to the Soul's "Take me . . ."

In the end, "The Dream of Gerontius" is perhaps beyond the sensual — more spiritual, sublime.—J. F. T.