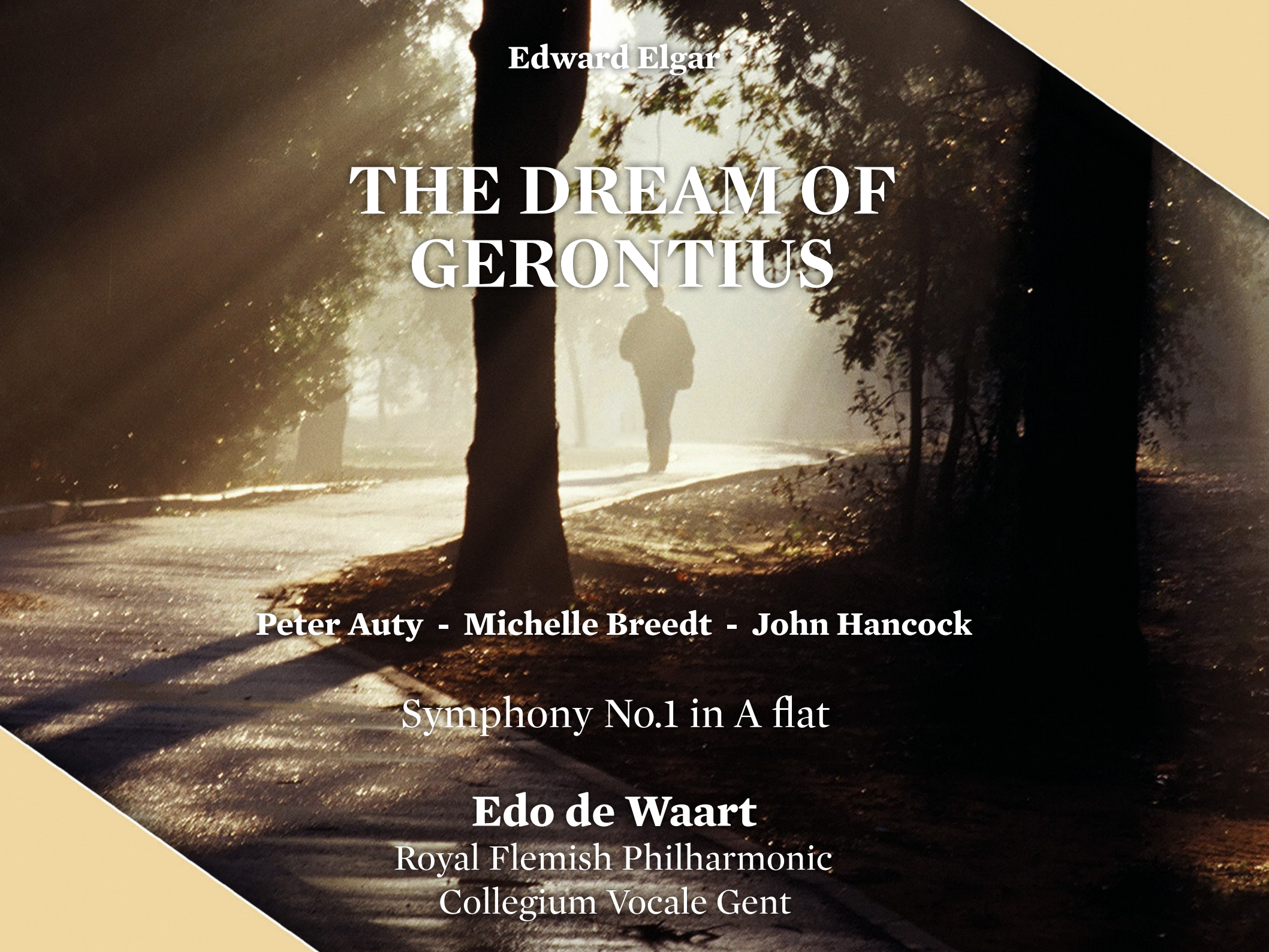




**Edward Elgar**

# **THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS**

**Peter Auty - Michelle Breedt - John Hancock**

**Symphony No.1 in A flat**

**Edo de Waart**

**Royal Flemish Philharmonic  
Collegium Vocale Gent**

**Edward Elgar (1857 – 1934)**  
**The Dream of Gerontius, Op. 38**  
CD 1 (5186 473)

**Part I**

- |                                           |       |
|-------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Prelude                                | 9. 33 |
| 2. Jesus Maria (Gerontius)                | 3. 43 |
| 3. Kyrie eleison (Chorus, Gerontius)      | 5. 47 |
| 4. Sanctus fortis (Gerontius)             | 7. 15 |
| 5. Rescue him, o Lord (Chorus, Gerontius) | 3. 39 |
| 6. Profiscere anima (Priest, Chorus)      | 6. 40 |

**Part II**

- |                                                                   |        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| 7. (Andantino)                                                    | 1. 39  |
| 8. I went to sleep (Soul of Gerontius, Angel)                     | 12. 08 |
| 9. Low-born clouds (Chorus, Angel)                                | 4. 31  |
| 10. I see not those false spirits (Soul, Angel)                   | 3. 06  |
| 11. Praise to the Holiest (Chorus, Angel, Gerontius)              | 5. 04  |
| 12. And now the threshold – Praise to the Holiest (Angel, Chorus) | 7. 51  |

Total playing time: 71. 11

CD 2 (5186 474)

**Part II (continued)**

- |                                                                     |       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Thy judgment is near (Soul, Angel)                               | 2. 41 |
| 2. Jesu by that shuddering dread (Angel of Agony)                   | 3. 56 |
| 3. I go before my judge - Be merciful, o Lord (Soul, Angel, Chorus) | 6. 05 |
| 4. Lord, Thou has been (Chorus)                                     | 1. 24 |
| 5. Angel's Farewell (Angel, Chorus)                                 | 6. 33 |

**Symphony No. 1 in A flat, Op. 55**

- |                                             |        |
|---------------------------------------------|--------|
| 6. Andante. Nobilmente e semplice – Allegro | 19. 16 |
| 7. Allegro molto                            | 7. 22  |
| 8. Adagio                                   | 11. 25 |
| 9. Lento – Allegro                          | 12. 24 |

Total playing time: 71. 12

Peter Auty - tenor  
Michelle Breedt - mezzo  
John Hancock - baritone

Royal Flemish Philharmonic  
Collegium Vocale Gent (choir master: Edward Caswell)  
Edo de Waart

Recording venue: Concert hall deSingel, Antwerpen (February 2013)  
Recording producer: Wilhelm Hellweg  
Balance engineer: Steven Maes  
Recording engineer: Tom Proost  
Assistant engineer: Kenny Bastiaens, Bram Heggermont  
Editing and mixing: Steven Maes, Serendipitous Studios, Mechelen, Belgium

Total playing time: 2. 22. 23

**deSingel**  
International Arts Campus



## The old man and the dream

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the oratorio was coming to its end. There was only one place in Europe where composers continued to pump out new music in the genre. In Victorian England, composers such as Stainer, Macfarren, Bennett, Stanford, and Parry overwhelmed their audience with impressive oratorios, often brimming with lavish choral pieces. It was in this world of choral festivals, amateur orchestras, and choral societies that Edward Elgar took his first steps. During the 1890s, he composed ambitious cantatas such as *The Black Knight*, *King Olaf*, and *Caractacus*, which impressed the audience with their compelling choral melodies and pseudo-religious subjects.

But when Elgar decided to write *The Dream of Gerontius* around the turn of the century, he knew that this text required a different approach. The poem by Cardinal John Henry Newman did not contain the material for a show-piece oratorio; rather, it was an elongated inner monologue – after all, all the “action” in *Gerontius* takes place in a timeless dream sequence. Such a structure, in which everything stems from the psycho-religious imagination of one main character, had no precedent in the English oratorio repertoire. The content was also original: the issue of inner peace had never previously been handled with such acuity in the history of the oratorio.

“I imagined Gerontius to be a man like us,” Elgar wrote. “Not a priest or a saint, but a sinner ... no end of 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.” Elgar divided the original poem into two tableaux. In the first, the dying Gerontius is portrayed, with friends and a priest praying at his deathbed. In the second tableau, the actual “dream”, Gerontius meets his guardian angel, who leads him before God. Whether Gerontius’ dream is reality, and whether he really did pass away, are questions which remain cleverly unanswered, even at the end.

Elgar introduces the music with an atmospheric prologue, without affirmative gestures or energetic melodies, yet full of despair and wonderment. Each time he works up to a climax with pounding timpani and organ tones, he maintains a balance between release and despair. When the prologue dies away, the strings come into action. Their churning music prepares the entrance of the elderly Gerontius, calling out to Jesus and Mary on his deathbed. His monologue ends when the priest’s assistants begin to chant a serene Kyrie eleison, followed by a peaceful appeal to the angels and saints to pray for Gerontius’ soul.

Gerontius urges himself to reflect on his entire life and thinking. In the next choral passage, the assistants ask God to safeguard him from fear and pain. In a third monologue (a mix of Latin proverbs and English sentences), Gerontius recites a tormented creed. The operatic writing style (with lingering melodies, rushing strings, surging winds, and strong chords) reveals that Gerontius is trying mainly to convince himself. Understandably enough, the chorus’ response is no longer unctuous, but firm: “Rescue him, O Lord, in this his evil hour.” As Gerontius sings his final lines, the music suggests that he is falling asleep. The solemn conclusion is reserved for the priest, who encourages the soul to leave the temporal body. The luminous final music fulfils a symbolic function. In his dream, Gerontius has left earthly life behind him.

The second tableau also begins with an orchestral prologue. As at the beginning, first an unadorned melody line is heard, which then slowly unfolds. But this time, the tone is different: no guilt-ridden, despairing motifs, but unctuous figures. “The Soul of Gerontius” now tells of his sudden insight into the course of events. The music (a loose pulse, shimmering strings, drifting woodwinds) reinforces the impression of weightlessness. Gerontius’ soul hears “a heart-subduing melody” that announces the arrival of his guardian angel. Yet Elgar does not illustrate this particular sensation. As the angel appears, she continues to sing in the same musical moduli as Gerontius. In other words, one moment does not differ from another, there is only a single musical continuum. Dramatically speaking, the operatic duet

that follows is the weakest passage in the entire work. Both voices speak to each other with ever-increasing exaltedness, resulting in a contrived and unwanted effect. As death has already occurred, the angel explains, thus also Gerontius’ fear of dying has receded. Moreover, judgment is already taking place in his soul.

After this dialogue, “a fierce hubbub” is heard, emanating from hungry, wild demons waiting to drag the damned souls down to hell. String-players beat their bows on the strings, the woodwinds screech, and the brass emits moaning sounds. A first chorus of demons is full of breathless phrases, irregular jumps, and sudden percussion figures. There is even an attempt to turn it into a fugue, which predictably ends in a tangle. A second chorus of demons, with deliberate dissonances and bursts of laughter, is even more stirring, and is propelled forward by a motif in the brass. Eventually, the laughter in the background disappears, although shreds of the music still flare up in the woodwinds.

“I see not those false spirits,” says Gerontius. Just as we did not hear the “heart-subduing melody” of the angel, he cannot see the demons. Seeing and hearing are human concepts that are no longer applicable: only pure thought is valid here. Elgar evokes the sound of the wind as the doors of heaven are opened up; and a little later, he uses the metaphor of rippling water by stirring up the entire orchestra with wild gestures. A majestic fugue culminates in a final chord in triple forte. After a long-held rest, the angel announces that they are approaching “the veiled presence of our God.” The orchestra intones the choral singing of the assistants from the first tableau, and an angel of death pleads with God for the tormented soul. His monologue, with dark orchestral colours, obscure harmonies, and poignant melodies, is reminiscent of Wagner’s *Parsifal*.

The angel tells Gerontius it is safe to look upon God. The orchestra swells into a colossal tutti, in which Elgar instructs the musicians to play as loudly as possible. The crashing blow symbolizes the appearance of God and, as the angel predicted, lasts for only a moment. Gerontius is immediately filled with love, but also with shame. After all, in Newman’s vision, weighing the sins is a

mystical revelation: love and punishment, injury and anointment take place at the same moment. Plagued by guilt and shame, Gerontius begs to be sent down to purgatory. The souls in purgatory begin singing psalm verses a cappella, and the angel lets Gerontius' soul sink down into the bottomless water. There is a striking use of textual metaphors for falling asleep in the closing song: Gerontius dreams that the angel is putting him to sleep, which creates a suggestion of returning to mundane reality, presented in this way as "a dream within a dream." And the music appears to support that line of thinking. In the final bars, the choir is divided, and again the earthly prayers ring out that were heard earlier at Gerontius' death-bed. Elgar's music pulsates towards a bright final chord in D major.

It was not just the feckless performance that caused Gerontius to flop at the première (Elgar remarked afterwards that God had set his face against his art). This was an "oratorio" that did not simply conform to the Victorian codes. Elgar had very aptly turned Newman's poem about guilt and redemption into something rather like a Wagnerian "music drama". It was no coincidence that Gerontius had a far better reception in Germany. When Richard Strauss heard the work in Dusseldorf, he made a toast to "the first progressive English composer". Encouraged by the foreign praise for Gerontius, Elgar designed a "Wagnerian" oratorio trilogy, in which he explicitly transformed biblical subjects into metaphysical music dramas. In the end, he completed only two of the oratorios, *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*. He gradually lost interest in vocal music, and turned increasingly to orchestral music. Yet for him, composition was not an abstract matter. He wrote as follows about his *Symphony No. 1*: "The listener may like to know this much and identify his own life's experiences with the music as he hears it unfold: I have had a wide experience of life but ... as to the phases of pride, despair, anger, peace, and the thousand-and-one things that occur between the first page and the last, I prefer the listener to draw what he can from the sounds he hears."

Indeed, a lot can be drawn from Elgar's symphony,

presented here as an arsenal of impressions. Following a darkly velvet introduction, strings and woodwinds develop a simple, generous melody. Immediately, one becomes aware of a characteristic orchestration technique, typical of Elgar: scraps of melody receive an extra hue through the addition of flutes or horns, making the melody shimmer. When the "bronzed" melody is heard a second time, Elgar deploys the entire orchestra. *Nobilmente e semplice* is stated above the score. But what appears to be a well-turned phrase is merely a pretext: Elgar's melody sways against the beat, places accents in strange places, and is not entirely accurate as far as the tone is concerned.

The main melody (in the words of the composer "the sort of ideal call – in the sense of persuasion, not coercion or command") expires, and the *Allegro* begins without further transition. Chromaticism creeps into the music, and a pelting theme in the strings bounces restlessly up and down. It seems as if Elgar first evokes an archaic world, and then points ahead to a chromatic future. There is much Wagnerian wrangling, and a sense of order is sacrificed to all kinds of struggles. The familiar main melody seems far away, even in a literal sense: when it returns four minutes before the end, it is introduced by the last string stands. This movement comes to an end with an orchestra that has been twisted to bits. The conclusion is wonderful: musical remnants swirling around a lost core.

The score is also imbued with changes in hue in the *Allegro molto*. A resting point is achieved as harps lay down a rippling carpet, above which two flutes begin to wiggle away. "Play it like something you hear by the river," Elgar told the flutes when rehearsing this music. The innocently beautiful "river music" (which at times is somewhat reminiscent of *Das Rheingold*) feels like a meditative caesura within a scherzo full of little marches and caustic strings. Without a break, the music continues in a lengthy *Adagio*, one of the most beautiful slow movements in the late-Romantic literature. Elgar orchestrates something like a golden sunset: during a period of twelve minutes, the entire orchestra sinks down gradually into the ground, with ever-darkening colours in the palette.

To conclude, the finale is unmistakably inspired by the final movement of Brahms' *Symphony No. 3*. It contains the same rhythmic drive, the same contrary accents, the same turbulent cello melody. Elgar begins with a mysterious intro, with vague hints of the noble opening melody. The *Allegro* twice features the main melody: at first silent and timid, and then glorious, fortissimo in the brass. After that, it is somewhat abruptly over and out.

Almost always, Elgar's music radiates a nostalgic longing. Often, he lets loose his melodies, only to recall them later with a certain wistfulness. Each time the main melody of his *Symphony No. 1* returns, it is no more than a memory. When the melody prevails at the end, the violins and woodwinds pound away at it mercilessly.

However – and here Elgar differs from his contemporary, Mahler – he is at ease with this kind of transience. He does not regret or extrapolate the loss; rather, he takes comfort from it in a unique manner. His compositions do not consist of violently rough-hewn expressions and sharp images, but nostalgic reveries. The elusive moods and introverted emotions that made Gerontius so unique always formed an intrinsic part of his later works.

Tom Janssens

English translation: *Fiona J. Stroker-Gale*



