

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Pappano: Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius

Tuesday, April 21, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican

Antonio Pappano, conductor · David Butt Philip, tenor · Emily D'Angelo, mezzo-soprano · William Thomas, bass · London Symphony Chorus, choir
approximately 95 minutes

Edward Elgar

1857–1934

95 minutes

The Dream of Gerontius, Op. 38

THE COMPOSER

Edward Elgar (1857–1934) was the composer who, more than any other, restored England to the front rank of European music after two centuries in which it had produced no figure of international stature. Largely self-taught, the son of a Worcester music-shop owner and organist, he made his way slowly from the provinces to national and then world fame, achieving his breakthrough in 1899 with the Enigma Variations. A late Romantic to his core, steeped in Wagner, Brahms and Richard Strauss yet unmistakably English in his blend of nobility, warmth and wistful melancholy, he gave his country a body of great orchestral music: two symphonies, concertos for violin and cello, the Enigma Variations, the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* and the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches. Knighted and laden with honours, he became the very emblem of Edwardian Britain, though his finest music reaches far beyond pomp into a deep, often autumnal expressivity. His wife Alice's death in 1920 effectively silenced him as a composer for his last years.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Dream of Gerontius is Edward Elgar's choral masterpiece and one of the supreme achievements of British music: a vast, deeply felt setting for soloists, chorus and orchestra of a poem by Cardinal John Henry Newman. (Elgar himself disliked calling it an oratorio; the word appears nowhere in the score.) Newman's poem traces the journey of a soul: Gerontius, a devout man, dies; his soul leaves his body and is carried by his Guardian Angel through the realms beyond death, encountering demons and angelic choirs, toward the moment of judgement before God, and finally to the threshold of Purgatory and eventual salvation. It is a profoundly Catholic vision of death not as an end but as a passage, and Elgar, himself a Catholic, poured his whole soul into it.

Completed in 1900, the work had a famously troubled premiere in Birmingham that year (the chorus master had died suddenly, the amateur chorus was unprepared, and the conductor Hans Richter received the full score only on the eve of the orchestral rehearsals), which deeply wounded Elgar. But it was soon rescued by triumphant performances in Germany (in Düsseldorf in 1901 and 1902, after which Richard Strauss toasted ‘the first English progressive musician, Meister Elgar’) and went on to become a cornerstone of the British choral tradition, performed by choirs and orchestras across the world. Musically it is continuous and through-composed, more like a sacred music-drama than a sequence of separate numbers, built from a web of recurring leitmotifs (Elgar had absorbed the lessons of Wagner) that represent ideas like Sleep, Fear, Prayer, Judgement and Divine Mercy. Running about an hour and forty minutes without interval, it is a journey of overwhelming emotional and spiritual power, and a perfect vehicle for the LSO, its chorus and a great conductor like Antonio Pappano.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The work falls into two parts. **Part I** takes place at Gerontius’s deathbed: listen for the hushed, mysterious orchestral Prelude that lays out the main leitmotifs you will hear throughout. The tenor (Gerontius) sings of his fear and faith as death approaches (listen for the great outpouring ‘Sanctus fortis,’ his profession of belief), while the chorus of friends prays around him, and the bass (the Priest) finally sends his soul on its way with the noble ‘Proficiscere, anima Christiana’ (‘Go forth, Christian soul’).

Part II is set in the world beyond. Listen for the magical change of atmosphere as the Soul awakes, weightless and wondering, accompanied by the serene mezzo-soprano (the Angel) who guides him. Listen for the snarling, sneering chorus of **Demons** (a brilliant, biting fugal episode); for the radiant ‘**Praise to the Holiest in the height,**’ the work’s great choral climax, a tremendous hymn of praise; for the bass’s awe-struck ‘Angel of the Agony’; and for the overwhelming orchestral blaze at the instant the Soul glimpses God, followed by its anguished, transformed cry. Finally, listen for the Angel’s tender farewell, the ‘Softly and gently,’ as the Soul is laid to rest in Purgatory and the music dies away in consolation and peace. Throughout, follow the interplay of the three soloists, the great chorus (here the

London Symphony Chorus) and Elgar's glowing, Wagnerian orchestra, and surrender to one of the most moving spiritual journeys in all music.

Tonight's artists

David Butt Philip *tenor*

The tenor carries the title role of Gerontius, the dying man whose soul we follow on its journey beyond death, and it is one of the most demanding and exposed parts in the choral repertoire, requiring both heroic power and the utmost tenderness and vulnerability. David Butt Philip, a British tenor celebrated for his ringing, dramatic voice, brings exactly the combination of strength and sensitivity that Gerontius's terror, faith and final peace demand.

David Butt Philip, born in 1980 and raised in Wells, Somerset, is one of the leading British tenors of his generation, increasingly in demand internationally for the heavier lyric and dramatic repertoire. A chorister at Peterborough Cathedral as a boy, he studied at the University of Liverpool, the Royal Northern College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music before training at the National Opera Studio in London. He began as a baritone in the Glyndebourne chorus before retraining as a tenor, was a Jette Parker Young Artist at the Royal Opera House, and has sung roles ranging from Rodolfo and Pinkerton to Grigori in Boris Godunov. His powerful, ringing tone and dramatic commitment make him an ideal Gerontius, one of the great challenges of the tenor repertoire.

Emily D'Angelo *mezzo-soprano*

The mezzo-soprano sings the Angel: Gerontius's Guardian Angel, who appears in Part II to guide and comfort the Soul on its journey, and who has the work's most tender and consoling music, including the radiant final farewell 'Softly and gently, dearly-ransomed soul.' Emily D'Angelo, one of the most admired young mezzos before the public, brings her warm, beautiful tone and expressive depth to this role of serene compassion.

Emily D'Angelo, born in Toronto in 1994, is one of the most acclaimed young mezzo-sopranos in the world, a charismatic singer admired for the beauty and richness of her voice, her stage presence and her adventurous artistry. She studied at the University of Toronto and trained in the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio and the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann programme, and made history at the Operalia competition as the first singer to win all four of its first prizes. An exclusive Deutsche Grammophon artist, she is equally at home in the great operatic mezzo roles and in contemporary and crossover projects (her debut album *enargeia* won a Juno Award). Her warm, glowing tone is ideally suited to the Angel's music of consolation in Gerontius.

William Thomas *bass*

The bass takes two solemn roles: the Priest, who at the end of Part I sends Gerontius's soul on its way with the great 'Proficiscere, anima Christiana' ('Go forth, Christian soul'), and the Angel of the Agony, who in Part II pleads for the Soul at the moment of judgement. Both call for gravity, authority and a sonorous depth of tone, qualities the young British bass William Thomas brings in abundance.

William Thomas is a fast-rising British bass, admired for the depth, richness and nobility of his voice. A graduate of the opera course at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, he has won a string of major prizes, including the Kathleen Ferrier Award, the John Christie Award and the Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition, and his recent and forthcoming engagements include Daland in *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Opéra national de Lorraine and house debuts at the Staatsoper Berlin and Cologne Opera. His sonorous, weighty bass is well suited to the grave, authoritative roles of the Priest and the Angel of the Agony in Gerontius.

London Symphony Chorus *choir*

The chorus is at the very heart of The Dream of Gerontius, taking on a remarkable range of roles: the friends praying at Gerontius's deathbed, the snarling Demons who taunt the passing Soul, and above all the great angelic choirs whose tremendous hymn 'Praise to the Holiest in the height' forms the work's overwhelming climax. The London Symphony Orchestra's own chorus carries this vast and varied choral writing, central to the work's spiritual and dramatic power.

The London Symphony Chorus was founded in 1966 as the chorus of the London Symphony Orchestra. Now an independent, self-governing choir, it keeps a close association with the LSO, performing and recording the great choral-orchestral repertoire with the orchestra at the Barbican and elsewhere, and also working with other orchestras.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Elgar**

Michael Kennedy, Cambridge University Press 2004

A concise life of Elgar that places The Dream of Gerontius in his career, from its troubled Birmingham premiere in 1900 to its later success.

ACCESSIBLE **The Dream of Gerontius**

John Henry Newman, St Pauls Publishing 2001

Cardinal Newman's poem, which Elgar abridged for his libretto; reading it whole shows what he kept and what he cut from the soul's journey after death.

DEEPER **Edward Elgar: A Creative Life**

Jerrold Northrop Moore, Oxford University Press 1987

A large biography that follows Elgar's creative life year by year, with extended discussion of The Dream of Gerontius and the Catholic faith behind it.

SOURCES

1. Elgar: The Dream of Gerontius, 21 Apr 2026, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/elgar-the-dream-of-gerontius-21-apr-26>
2. The Dream of Gerontius, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dream_of_Gerontius
3. David Butt Philip, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Butt_Philip
4. Emily D'Angelo, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_D'Angelo
5. William Thomas, Askonas Holt. <https://www.askonasholt.com/artists/william-thomas/>
6. The Life of Elgar, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521009072>
7. The Dream of Gerontius, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780818909078>
8. Edward Elgar: A Creative Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780192840141>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-04-21-pappano>

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