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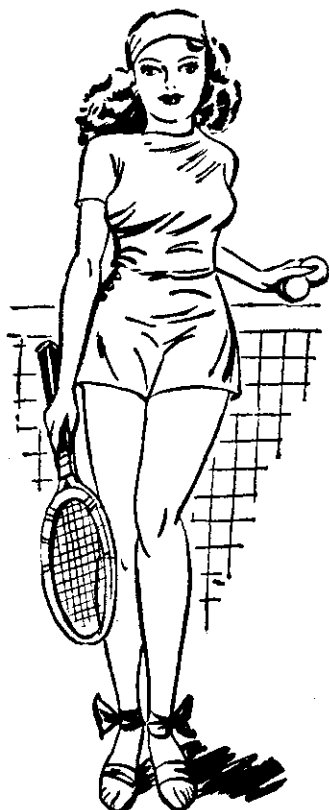
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9/11/45

ELGAR'S "DREAM OF GERONTIUS"

A Work of Self-Revelation

ANOTHER major work by a great English composer, this time Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*, has been recorded in the series sponsored by the British Council, and it is being heard this week and next from Station 2YA. It is an oratorio, a setting of the poem by Cardinal Newman, for three soloists, chorus, and orchestra. Half of it is to be heard from 2YA on Tuesday, November 6, and the remainder at 8.0 p.m. on Tuesday, November 13. Later it will be heard from other stations.

In 1899, Elgar wrote his *Enigma Variations*, one of the first works to draw the world's attention to his music and early in 1900 he withdrew to the country to work on the idea that had been developing in his mind for eleven years—the setting of *The Dream of Gerontius*.

A Bad Start

Elgar finished his setting in June, 1900, and it was rehearsed for the Birmingham festival in October. Misfortunes, however, ruined its first performance. The choir's conductor died during rehearsals and the change over to another man only made the already difficult work of learning it much more difficult. Elgar himself heard the first rehearsal with orchestra and told the choir very plainly what he thought of their treatment of his work and then left the hall. So the final performance left a lot to be desired, and very few people realised they had been listening to a masterpiece. The incident at the rehearsal had created an unsatisfactory atmosphere: the second chorus-master was a non-conformist who was unsympathetic to the work, and the conditions essential to an understanding of it had not been achieved at the festival. A work so new in idiom and conception needed to be very accurate in detail and vocal pitch if it was to be understood.

So *The Dream of Gerontius* was laid aside in England until it was given a fine performance at Dusseldorf in a German translation in 1901. The following year it was repeated there and the German press called Elgar one of the leaders of modern musical art. Then Richard Strauss, at the time the leading figure in the world of composers, rose at a luncheon and said: "I drink to the success and welfare of the first English progressive musician, Meister Elgar." And the British public awoke to the situation.

In September, 1902, the work had its first satisfactory hearing. W. H. Reed, Elgar's friend and biographer, was playing in the orchestra and he describes the occasion (it was at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester Cathedral): "Elgar was in black, having lost his mother only a week or so earlier; he looked very solemn and serious, it was all most impressive in the cathedral and the acoustics were ideal. The prelude opened with that intense unison phrase, *lento mistico*, the cor anglais joining at the fifth bar, adding the curious colour which rivets the attention. It was almost impossible



SIR EDWARD ELGAR
"An inevitable personal problem"

for the tension to relax or for the mind to wander until that inspired and spiritual music ceased to roll round the arches, roof, and pillars of that cathedral."

Contemplative, Not Dramatic

Reginald Nettel, author of "Music in the Five Towns," says Elgar's conception of oratorio was "like Handel's *Messiah*, contemplative." In *The Dream of Gerontius*, "he turns inwards to his own private beliefs, and although there are dramatic moments in it—as in the choruses of the damned—the work is principally a work of self-revelation—introspective, and finding its expression of man's relation to God through the channels of the religious creed Elgar embraced, Roman Catholicism."

"It was not easy to sing," Nettel continues, "and still less easy to understand. There was a mystery about 'The Dream.' The mystery continued until the local press (in Hanley) elucidated it by changing 'mystery' to 'mystical.' The phrase stuck: everybody talked about Elgar's 'mystical' oratorio. So when the time came for performance, everybody in the audience knew that they were to hear something different from any other oratorio they had heard and they were prepared. . . . *The Dream of Gerontius* was not to be dismissed as an effective entertainment: it had to be faced as an inevitable personal problem, and there is no denying that to many people, especially those who tend to regard music as a mere entertainment, the problem of death and one's personal relationship to the eternal is liable to be evaded whenever possible. The contemplation of *The Dream of Gerontius* requires moral courage, and a certain measure of soul-probing commensurable with the experience of Gerontius himself."

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