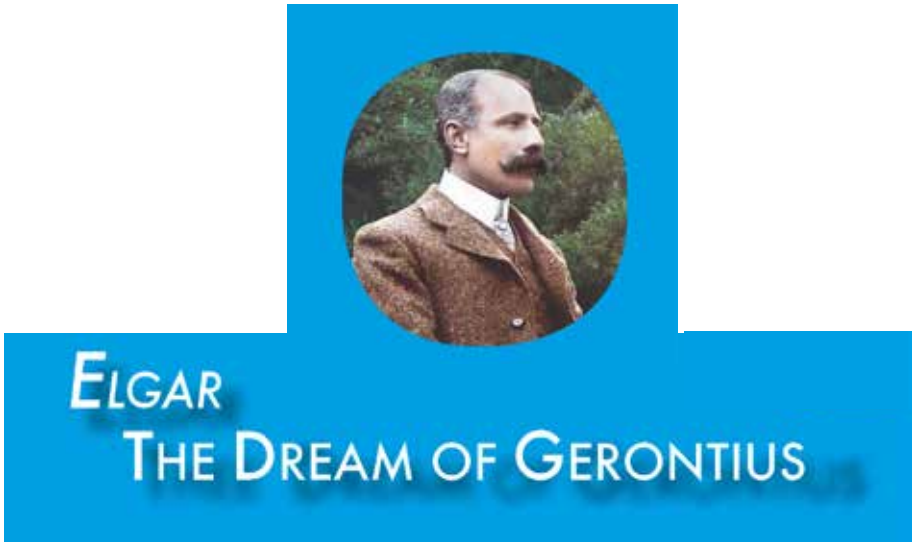


The text of Elgar's Dream of Gerontius Margaret Holden

(August 2013, revised January 2024)

INTRODUCTION

The following article is about the text of ***The Dream of Gerontius*** *used by Edward Elgar in his work composed in 1900. Elgar took slightly less than half of John Henry Newman's poem of 1865 and edited it to focus on its central narrative. It is a dramatic poem which portrays the death of an elderly Christian man and what happens to his soul as he enters into eternity and the state of Purgatory.*

My intention is to help singers to understand the text better. My method will therefore be to examine some of Newman's background and the context of the poem, then to focus on the narrative of Elgar's libretto, with much reference to Newman's original text. I will explain points of Catholic theology and practice where this helps to explain and understand the story of Gerontius and his journey. I will outline Newman's understanding of the universal story it considers and consider some of the questions this poses.

What happens beyond death has been one of the great matters reflected on by religion and philosophy since the dawn of time. Newman and Elgar responded to these questions as Catholics of their time, though The Dream is also the fruit of Newman's long journey from the Evangelical Anglicanism of his adolescence into the Roman Catholic tradition.



John Henry Newman (1801 – 1890) was baptised as an Anglican. After studies at Oxford he was ordained as an Anglican priest. In 1828 Newman became Vicar or the University Church there, and later one of the leaders of the Oxford movement, the aim of which was to renew the spirit of the Church of England along apostolic and [universal] Catholic lines. This led him to become a Roman Catholic in 1845, and because he was unmarried, he was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest in 1847. He was appointed a Cardinal in 1879. Newman wrote extensively, both as an Anglican and as a Catholic - theological, philosophical, historical and literary works, and much of his writing was both highly influential and controversial at the time. His pastoral and academic life was devoted to education and spiritual formation. Elgar had owned a copy of Newman's poem since at least 1885; Alice Elgar's diary for September 1899 records how *"E. walked with Father Bellasis"*, a priest who had known Newman personally.

In the late nineteenth century, the majority of the population of the British Isles would still have been considered to be Christian, adhering to the beliefs of the Creed. Weekly Church attendance and personal prayer would have been a natural part of life, although liturgical practices and the particular

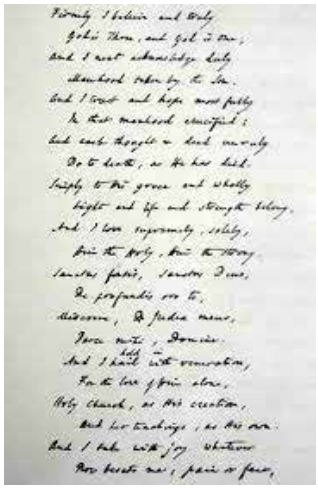
doctrinal beliefs which gave rise to them differed according to denomination. It was this common core of belief which helped to give The Dream of Gerontius such universal appeal when it was published, despite the denominational rivalries of the times. It is clear from contemporary sources (eg letters and journals) that readers of The Dream admired Newman for his integrity in following the truth wherever it led him, and in spite of the consequences for him personally. General Gordon used the poem in the last moments before his death at Khartoum in 1884. Even Newman's chief protagonist, the novelist Charles Kingsley, wrote in 1868 *"I read The Dream with awe and admiration. However utterly I may differ from the entourage in which Newman's present creed surrounds the central idea, I must feel that the central idea is as true as it is noble, and it, I suppose, is this: the longing of the soul to behold the Deity….."*

In a lecture at the Southbank Centre in January 2013, the composer James MacMillan took The Dream as a starting point to explore what place faith and spirituality has in artistic vision. I think it is worth giving a longish quote from his talk. He wrote: *"Does religious thought liberate or shackle the imagination? Today, do we treat "faith" as something of a dirty word when it comes to music and the arts? It is worth considering the deep inspiration of John Henry Newman on Elgar."*

MacMillan continues: *"Since the composition of Gerontius, commentators have fallen over themselves in an attempt to paint Elgar's Catholic faith as weak or insignificant. Elgar was to suffer for his courageous vision as performances of The Dream were banned as "inappropriate" in Gloucester Cathedral for a decade after the premiere, and performances in places like Hereford and Worcester were only permitted with large sections of the text bowdlerised, with much of the "objectionable" Catholic dimension removed". [eg, brief references to Mary] " It is thought by some that the vehemence of the reaction impacted greatly on the composer, even to the extent of him gradually losing his faith over the rest of his life……But it was from this Catholic religion of martyrs and saints that Elgar drew his most unfettered freedom to visualise a work of greatness."*

"…Thinking of a range of modernist composers since then, including Stravinsky, and more recently, John Tavener, one realises that far from being a spent force, religion has proved to be a vibrant, animating principle in modern music and continues to promise much for the future. It could even be said that any discussion of modernity's mainstream in music would be incomplete without a serious reflection on the spiritual values, belief and practice at work in composers' minds."

NEWMAN'S TEXT



Elgar's work is divided into two parts: Part I shows Gerontius's last moments on earth, in the company of his friends and his priest. Part II concerns the journey of Gerontius's Soul after death towards an initial meeting with God and thence to purgatory. Newman's poem, however, is divided into seven parts.

Elgar used the greater part of Newman's ***Part 1;*** The old man, Gerontius, lies on his deathbed surrounded by his friends and a priest. Elgar kept the first eighteen opening lines of Newman's text, expressing Gerontius' great anguish as he faces the unknown, and then exhaustion, tranquillity and acceptance. Elgar told his publisher Jaeger. *"I imagined Gerontius to be a man like us, not a priest or a saint, but a sinner ... Therefore I've not filled his part with Church tunes and rubbish but a good, healthy, full-blooded romantic, remembered worldliness."*

The friends at Gerontius's bedside pray for him with the litany of the saints, which is also used at the start of life in the Baptismal liturgy. At the rehearsals for the first performance, Elgar urged the chorus not to sing as though they were in church, but with *'more tears in their voices,'* as though they were at the side of a dying friend.

The sacraments and the prayers of his friends strengthen Gerontius and he makes his profession of Faith for a final time, in the words of the now famous hymn '*Firmly I Believe and Truly.*' The inclusion of the words from the Good Friday liturgy (Sanctus Fortis etc) make it clear that Gerontius is also being strengthened by reflecting on Christ's own last hours on earth. Nevertheless, he is still aware that 'Some bodily forms of ill' are taunting him. These are the demons he will encounter later. Despite this, he dies at peace and in a state of grace. Elgar's Part 1 concludes as the priest sings the ***Profiscere*** '*Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul!... Go, in the name of God...*'

Parts 2 –7 of Newman's text were all condensed by Elgar into his part II. The whole of this part is devoted to the journey which the Soul of Gerontius makes towards Judgement accompanied by his Guardian Angel who counsels him about his new state of being and supports him as he encounters the unknown.

In Newman's ***Part 2***, the Soul of Gerontius sings *'I went to sleep; and now I am refreshed. '* He feels *'a sense of freedom, as I were at length myself, and ne'er had been before'*, and he realises that he is outside of time. Gerontius's Soul hears singing and realises that *'someone has me fast within his ample palm.'* The Guardian Angel sings "*My work is done, my task is o'er… My Father gave in charge to me this child of earth, e'en from its birth, to serve and save…And saved is he.*"

In ***Part 3,*** Gerontius' Soul is curious to know '*a maze of things*' about his new condition. The Angel reassures him and tells him that he is being carried into the presence of the Judge, but that the '*calm and joy uprising in thy soul Is first-fruit to thee of thy recompense, And heaven begun.*'

In ***Part 4***, the Angel with its charge is soaring towards the heavenly realm and passes a horde of demons. They are angry with God for being cast out of his presence and angry with humans for being able to attain God's presence. Newman's text makes this very clear. They are cowards who are powerless to hurt the Soul and his Angel, but mock them as they pass by. Elgar has made this into a fierce, mocking fugue, intensified by cries of sarcastic laughter.

As the demons pass, Gerontius' Soul notices that he has only heard them, not seen them and he wonders if he will be able to see God. Again, the Angel reassures him, and they continue past the demons and move nearer to the presence of the Judge.

In ***Part 5,*** Gerontius' Soul and his Angel draw closer to the Throne of Judgement, and hear choirs of angels around it singing *"Praise to the Holiest in the heigh"t.* Newman repeats this hymn five times within his poem, varying the words as a narrative commentary about salvation history; Elgar includes it three times.

As ***Part 6*** begins, the Angel and Gerontius' Soul get nearer still to the Throne. He hears the prayers of his friends on earth arising before the Throne. The Angel of the Agony, who strengthened Christ in Gethsemane prays for him. The Soul says ***"I go before my Judge"*** and darts from his Guardian Angel's grasp and flies *"to the dear feet of Emmanuel.."* [one of the names used for the Messiah/Jesus in scripture]. The Soul is left stunned but safe, *'consumed yet quickened'* at the foot of the Throne as he realises his need for purification before he can see God face to face. Gerontius' Soul asks to be sent to Purgatory and sings the beautiful song "*Take me away,*" He returns to his Angel and they continue towards Purgatory.

Part 7 starts with the Angel preparing to hand over his charge to the Angels of Purgatory. We hear the hopeful singing of ***Psalm 90*** by the souls in Purgatory. "Lord*, Thou hast been our refuge: in every generation ….*" Although it is only briefly referenced by Elgar, Newman includes most of the text of this psalm which contrasts the transience of mortal existence with the permanence and beauty of what is to come.

As the Angel gently places the Soul of Gerontius in the cooling waters of Purgatory, he sings *"Farewell, but not forever brother dear…..Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here, and I will come and wake Thee on the morrow, "* when he comes to take the Soul into the eternity of Heaven.

Newman's poem finishes with these words, but Elgar repeats the singing of the souls in Purgatory and finishes his work with the choir of Angelicals singing '*Praise to the Holiest.*'

Newman's poetic form in The Dream has been described by the academic Helen Hole as the *"poetry of dogma which conceives of dogma as a mystery appealing to the imagination as well as to the reason*." The liturgical passages (eg the litanies and prayers) are used as vehicles to express religious ideas. They contrast with imaginative descriptions about what Gerontius' Soul is experiencing in his new existence. He discovers the qualities of subtlety and agility which theologians traditionally attribute to incorporeal existence, for example, a reliance on sound and hearing. In Part 2 as he wakes he realises that he cannot now hear his 'fluttering breath, nor struggling pulse'. In Part 4, as the demons pass, Gerontius' Soul notes that he has only heard them, not seen them.

Not only Elgar's music, but also the language of Newman's text, is filled with cadence, rhythm and harmony. The poem has other musical elements besides the litanies of the first part. There are the five hymns of the angelic choirs which contrast dramatically with the cacophony of the demonic choirs in Part 4. Their incoherence reflects the traditional Christian teaching about infernal chaos. They show loathing of Christian devotion and a cynicism towards those who aspire to be saintly.

Part 3 of The Dream includes a thought-provoking reflection on the concept of time both at the moment of death and in eternity. There is a contrast between what seems to be the long journey of Gerontius' Soul towards Purgatory and the fraction of time that has elapsed on earth between his death at the start, and the prayers of his friends and the priest at his bedside near the end of the poem. The first stanza of Newman's text also contains a description of death from a psychological

perspective, (using phrases like *'emptying out of each constituent.'*) Regrettably, there isn't room here for any further discussion of these ideas.

THEOLOGY

Newman's core beliefs which he expresses in The Dream, date from his youth. They are; - the uniqueness and immortality of each human soul, the reality of the life of the world to come, the divinity of Jesus Christ the Son of God who was made incarnate and died to save humans from the effects of sin.

Coming from a tradition of evangelical Anglicanism, Newman had grown up believing that sinners became righteous (= virtuous/good/ just) purely by God's grace through faith in Christ, rather than through their own merit and worthiness. Hence the only end to someone's life on earth would be immediate reward for a good life, or condemnation for very grave sin etc .

However Newman's studies of scripture and the writings of the earliest Christian theologians [2nd - 4th Centuries - called collectively the Church Fathers] and later Anglican scholars, led him to develop and revise his beliefs. His beliefs about Angels, about how humans are judged after death, and about what happens to the soul after death developed very much. This is especially the case with regard to Purgatory, which he had accepted unequivocally by the time he became a Catholic.

Newman's 1845 study ***An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*** describes the way Catholic teaching has grown organically over the centuries to become more detailed and clear. Doctrines present in embryo at the beginnings of Christianity had to be thought out, lived out in the liturgical life of the Church, and even pieced together by the Church Fathers, and by Ecumenical Councils and Synods. In this way, the Church has gained an ever-deepening understanding of the realities which they try to express. This, I think, is particularly the case for Newman's Dream of Gerontius, which is

brings the fruits of his understanding of doctrine to bear on his personal experience of illness and his perception of the death of many loved ones.

Newman had a profound conviction that all mortal life is but "a serious dream…."; that earthly life is "in itself a kind of shadow without substance. . . . ". Therefore some academics have argued that The Dream draws on the philosophy of Plato, in whom much Christian theology has been grounded.

Plato asks us to imagine a cave in which prisoners are chained in such a way that all they can see are shadows thrown on a wall in front of them. They think that these shadows are reality, having known nothing else all their lives. If one of them were freed and allowed to emerge into the daylight, she/he would see things as they are, and realise how limited his/her vision was in the cave. They would be quite unwilling to return. Plato writes "You must not wonder that those who attain to this beatific vision are unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell." (Republic VII, 516)

When Gerontius actually dies, the dream stops and the transcendent realities of the spiritual world begin. His Soul says "I went to sleep;.... . I had a dream…" He wonders whether ' the vast universe, where [he has] dwelt … Is quitting me, or I am quitting it.." In Part 4 the Angel tells him "Thou art wrapp'd and swathed around in dreams, dreams that are true, yet enigmatical."

In an early Anglican sermon "On the Greatness and Littleness of Human Life", Newman wrote that we "are immortal spirits, independent of time and space, and this life is but a sort of outward stage, on which we act for a time." Here, of course, is a theme present in much literature including Shakespeare. Some have argued that there is an ambiguity in the dream frame of the poem and suggest that Gerontius' dream only begins when he sinks into unconsciousness and no longer hears the prayers around his bedside. His dream ends when he wakes into the afterlife. Thus, when exactly Gerontius' dream begins and ends has been the subject of much academic discussion.

It is important to emphasise that traditional Christian belief in what happens to a person after death is centred not just in immortality. At its heart is the transforming power of God, which happens not

only during this life when God gives his help on a daily basis to each individual who is trying to live a good life, but also which continues after his/her death.

Hence Christians believe that their death is followed by a personal meeting with Christ, whose death on the Cross, and Resurrection takes away the power of sin and death to destroy human beings utterly. Those who have died in God's grace with all their sins repented and forgiven* go to heaven. (*the theological term for this is 'perfectly purified'). The meeting is called 'particular judgement'. Juan Velez says " It is sorrow and love communicated to the soul by a 'glance' of the loving God which consumes the soul." (see reading list below.) Those who have died in God's grace but with lesser sins unrepented go to Purgatory to be purified of their sins. Purgatory entails the absence of the marvellous vision of God, but the real assurance and anticipation of it are a source of peace and joy. Hence Newman's final imagery of Purgatory in The Dream is of cooling, soothing waters.

Now, perhaps some Christian readers at this point will be thinking that I have implied that the Protestant Churches also believe in Purgatory. But the key phrase at the start of my last paragraph is traditional Christian belief. In early Christian theology, to which Newman kept returning, there was a belief in a preparation after death for the meeting with God for the souls of those who had died. This was an intermediate state in which the souls of the just await the reward of paradise through a final preparation. There had been some bizarre and fantastic imaginings of the concept of purgatory and what happened there in medieval times. This had been challenged and rejected by the 16th century Protestant Reformers. Hence by the time Newman was writing there was, (and still is) a spectrum of belief across the Christian denominations about what happens after death and at judgement. At one

extreme is the Calvinist belief in the total condemnation of sinners who are predestined to eternal damnation. At the other end of the spectrum is the wide Unitarian confidence in universal forgiveness, regardless of repentance. In the middle of the spectrum is the belief in the intermediate state called Purgatory where the souls of the faithful departed prepare for the beatific vision of God himself. In Newman's time, the popular Catholic belief in purgatory was of a prison or hell of lesser intensity and limited duration.

But Newman paints a picture of the souls in Purgatory being assisted by the angels and the prayers both of those in heaven and on earth.

And all this brings in another important dimension of Christian life – the liturgical. The Sanctus Fortis in Part 1 is taken from the beautiful Good Friday liturgy. The hymn Firmly I Believe and Truly sums up Gerontius' belief in the Trinity in a credal statement.

The Dream begins with the Prayer of Commendation of the Soul of the dying person when they are near death - 'Go forth, Christian soul, from this world.' This is called the Profiscere. [Before the changes to the Liturgy in the 1960s – early '70s and the adoption of the vernacular, Catholic liturgical prayers used to be named by the Latin word with which they began]. The Profiscere is used to strengthen the dying person and those present with them. The beautiful words remind them of the hopeful nature and mystery of Christian death. In an article on the internet, Frank Beck comments that "Elgar's melody here seems to convey faith, sorrow and wonder, all at once."

But, significantly, this prayer, the litanies used in The Dream, and the Subvenite (mentioned in Part 6) which is said immediately after death, ask for the angels, saints and Mary the Mother of God to assist the soul and 'present him/her to God the Most High.' This idea is one of those doctrines so important to Christianity that it is present in that most basic statement of Christian belief, the Creed.The belief is also expressed in the prayers of every Eucharist.

This doctrine of the commonality of the Church in Heaven and the Church on Earth is called the Communion of Saints, and in fact constitutes the infrastructure of The Dream. Gerontius' friends on earth, the souls in Purgatory, the angels and the saints in heaven, (including all those unknown faithful departed not canonised) all constitute the Church as a communion of faith and charity. For Newman the Communion of Saints was a natural and undisputed part of Christian life. Hence to invoke the aid of the saints and of Mary was not idolatrous but a part of what being the community

of the Church meant in practical terms. [Many times in Paul's letters and in Acts of the Apostles members of those early Christian communities are termed 'saints' .. but I digress!!]

The new existence to which Gerontius awakens in Part 2 is peopled by saints, the souls of those in Purgatory and the angels- chiefly Gerontius' own Angel (or Guardian Angel), the Angelical choirs, the Angel of the Agony and the Angels of Purgatory. "The angels in this poem serve both as dramatic chorus and as a poetic response, however subtle, to Victorian materialism and scepticism regarding the supernatural order." (Carballo- see bibliography.)

For Newman the angels were not mythical figures or figments of the human mind but objects of belief. Although Catholic theology does not, strictly speaking, consider the existence of angels a matter of divine revelation, it is presupposed by scripture and Church teaching handed down through Tradition. The Greek word 'angelos' means a messenger, hence angels mediate the revelation of God. Through the ability of angels to communicate God's creative knowledge and purpose, humans comprehend the presence, knowledge and will of God for them. Theologically, though, angels are also cosmological principles, dynamic and mysterious. They are not living organisms with bodies because they cannot die. Nor are they subject to sickness, fatigue, hunger etc. However, they operate within time and space despite not being confined to historical existence as we know it. But their activities such as knowing,

willing, and remembering are sufficiently similar to human experience to be able to communicate with humans.

Gerontius's Angel has looked after him since he was created. The Angel's mission was 'to serve and save' and 'to rear and train' This task will conclude when he has delivered Gerontius's soul to Judgement and then to Purgatory. He teaches Gerontius about his new state of being, and guides him on his journey. But this lovely picture of the role of the Angels has been present in Catholic tradition for many centuries, and keen choral singers will realise that they have sung about it in the In Paradisums of Requiems ('May the Angels lead you into Paradise') and the final chorale in Bach's St John Passion "Ah Lord when my last end is come, bid angels bear my spirit home'

Newman's text includes the fascinating idea of the fallen angels now known as demons, who, before the world began, rebelled against the sovereignty of God and were cast out of his presence. Their role was then in the temptation and fall of human beings. These ideas are present in later Judaism, in some scripture and in some early Christian writing, before being taken up in dramatic form and included in medieval Mystery Plays. "The inclusion of the fallen angels serves a double purpose here: to offer in their blasphemous songs of irregular and harsh rhythms a dramatic contrast to the harmony of the angels' hymns recounting the interaction of God and humans, and to portray vividly the doctrine of free will so pivotal in this poem. Like Gerontius, the fallen angels once had a choice between God and hell." (Carballo)

CONCLUSION

Elgar wrote to Newman's friend Fr Bellasis that he had put his "whole soul into this work". He presented the manuscript of the full score to the Oratory in Birmingham where Newman had lived, worked and died; it can still be seen there today. It seems to me that no allegory, parable or imagery can explain even adequately the central theme and mystery of The Dream of Gerontius which is so profound, so inexpressible, that all words are poor approximations. Perhaps that is why Elgar's musical setting is so moving, so compelling and so necessary.

AND LASTLY…..

1. I first wrote this article for our performance of The Dream of Gerontius in 2013. As I tweak it a bit for our performance in 2024, I can't help but remember our dear friend Angela Harris, who lent me her cherished copy of the full text of Newman's poem. I believe with all my heart that she now understands fully what it meant, and is now experiencing fully that Reality to which Gerontius journeyed.

2. This is by no means a comprehensive piece. It barely scratches the surface of the theological and philosophical ideas in The Dream and totally omits the psychological implications. But it's long enough already and thank you for persisting with it!

HOWEVER …. if you would like to reflect further on the idea of particular judgement, it might be worth looking at a wonderful poem by George Herbert, 1593–1632 'Love Bade me Welcome' - set to music not only by the great Vaughan-Williams but also by John Tavener.

Also, I made up an allegorical story which I call 'Posh Do at the Ritz' which I used with teenagers in GCSE RE lessons to help them with these concepts. If anyone would like me to tell them the story, too, or to talk over any of the other ideas presented in this piece, please catch me at rehearsals! MMH

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING

The Dream of Gerontius- J H Newman – includes an introduction by Rev Gregory Winterton (Family Publications)

Newman's Theology in the Dream of Gerontius, Juan R. Velez G., New Blackfriars Vol 82 (2001)

Newman's 'Dream of Gerontius': Towards a Non-Didactic Poetry of Dogma Robert Carballo

Link for the prayers found in The Dream of Gerontius (the Profiscere in Part 1 and the Subvenite mentioned by the Angel at the start of Part 6) http://www.ibreviary.com/m/preghiere.php?tipo=Rito&id=371#pada

Frank Beck- The Dream of Gerontius A Musical Tour of the Work. http://www.elgar.org/3gerontt.htm

USEFUL PROGRAMMES AND PODCASTS ARCHIVED BY THE BBC AND OTHERS

1. BBC Radio 4 Soul Music Series 16 Episode 5

https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b036tbhd

(How the Dream of Gerontius has touched and changed people's lives. With Terry Waite and Jude Kelly. First broadcast 30th July 2013.)

2. https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/elgars-dream-gerontius-story-five-places

Four excellent podcasts by an Oxford academic for delving deeper into the background of both Newman's poem and Elgar's work.

3. https://www.classical-music.com/features/recordings/elgar-dream-of-gerontius-guide-and-best- recordings