

Gerontius' not quite sweetest dream

The one item on the programme was Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, a work of such profound depth that it can only stand alone.

It is a big work that suited the large choir assembled for the performance, matched by the power of the CSO.

The essence of *Gerontius*, however, is its introspection, and in this respect the performance was rather mixed.

The Elgarian rubato that gives the work its drama was sometimes evident and sometimes not. Understandably, it was long solo sections in which emotional impetus was often inflexible.

So let's consider the soloists. The voice of David Hamilton was true, though in relation to the orchestra rather restrained in the first half where he was the dying *Gerontius*.

His bewildered searching soul in the second part was more convincing, though even there, I

REVIEW

Christchurch City Choir, with Christ Church Cathedral Choir, 2008 Singing Scholars, members of the City of Dunedin Choir and Orpheus Choir (Wellington); soloists Kate Spence, mezzo, David Hamilton, tenor, and Paul Whelan, bass, with the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Brian Law. Town Hall auditorium, Saturday, September 13. Reviewed by David Sell.

waited in vain for the flexibility that would convey the full emotional force of his searching.

Kate Spence didn't quite have the voice of authority that one would expect from the Angel who is leading the soul to God.

A lovely rounded tone in her lower register made its emotional

impact, though the repeated alleluias needed to be more impassioned.

Paul Whelan was both the priest to the dying *Gerontius* and the Angel of Agony to his soul. In both he was outstanding, and the one singer who truly commanded his performance.

The only trouble was we didn't hear enough of him. I continue to marvel at the huge, still growing musical power of Whelan.

Gerontius is a challenge to any conductor, and Brian Law shaped the work convincingly. He had trained his choir thoroughly, and the massive climaxes were spine-tingling.

Elgar did his best to make the demons' chorus fiendishly difficult, but the choir beat him.

My last word, however, must go to the Cathedral boy choristers, whose pure bright tone added a brilliance to the peak choruses, yet could be as ethereal as the angel, or Elgar, would want.