

# Elgar: The Apostles and The Kingdom

A suggestion for a performance edition

Elgar's two major oratorios – The Apostles and the Kingdom have never enjoyed the same popularity as The Dream of Gerontius and there are some obvious reasons for this. Perhaps the most important of these is that neither, in themselves tell a complete story. Indeed, the story which Elgar originally had in mind was impossibly vast stretching as it did from Christ's first choosing of his disciples all the way through to the establishment of The Christian Church throughout the world and he planned to cover this material in a Wagnerian epic consisting of three major oratorios. In the event, Elgar had great difficulties both with the choice of words and the composition process, several times coming almost to the point of abandoning the project completely. In the end, the first oratorio (The Apostles) only carried the story as far as the Ascension and the second (The Kingdom) was never really finished at all and only covers the choice of Matthias as a replacement for Judas and the events of the Pentecost. As the scheduled time for the premier of The Kingdom loomed ever closer, Elgar was in despair of ever completing even half of the project and it was only at the insistence of his wife, Alice, that he was finally persuaded to cobble together enough material to satisfy his publisher. As a result, the oratorio ends in a most unsatisfactory way with Peter and the disciples praying desperately for guidance hidden away in an upper room. Although both works were accepted by their commissioners, the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival, and performed in 1903 and 1906 respectively, Elgar was never invited to write the third oratorio – one suspects much to his relief.

The two works also present considerable practical difficulties in performance. At over 2 hours, The Apostles is a bit long for modern audiences and requires at least 6 soloists as well as a huge orchestra. The Kingdom is more manageable being only 96 minutes in duration and requiring the usual 4 soloists but, as I have mentioned, has an unsatisfactory narrative and a weak conclusion. But both works contain music of sublime quality and it is a travesty that this music should go unperformed because of the shortcomings of the libretto and, it has to be admitted, Elgar's lack of consistent inspiration.

The idea therefore presents itself of creating, by careful selection, a single performable work containing Elgar's best music with a clear narrative and musical integrity. The last is easy to achieve because Elgar used themes and leitmotifs through out both works – so much so that it is already easy to think of the two works as being the first two parts of a single unfinished whole. With regard to choosing those parts of the works which are both essential to the story and which are of the highest quality, there is only one problem to solve which I shall discuss later.

Here is a list of the various sections of the two works. I have indicated with an asterisk those sections which, in my opinion (and others), contain music of the highest quality and with a dollar sign those sections which are essential to the narrative.

## **The Apostles: Part I**

**70:23**

* Prologue	6:16	Chorus
*\$ The calling of the Apostles	22:14	Angel, Jesus, John, Peter, Judas, Chorus
By the wayside	8:08	Jesus, Mary, John, Peter, Judas, Chorus
By the Sea of Galilee	1:42	Tenor (recitative)
In the Tower of Magdala	14:12	Mary, Jesus, Peter, Chorus
In Caesarea Philippi	4:01	Tenor, Jesus, Peter, Chorus
In Capernaem	7:10	Mary, Tenor, Chorus
Motet	6:40	Soli & Chorus

**The Apostles: Part II** **51:17**

	Introduction	4:17	
*\$	The Betrayal	23:20	Tenor, Peter, Judas, Contralto, Chorus
*\$	The Crucifixion	4:36	Mary, John, Chorus
*	At the Sepulchre	4:24	Contralto, Chorus
	The Ascension	14:27	Soli, Chorus

**The Kingdom** **96:00**

*	Prelude	7:46	
	In the Upper Room	17:35	Peter, Mary, John, Chorus
	At the Beautiful Gate	6:34	Mary, Mary Magdalene
*\$	Pentecost	25:20	Peter, John, Contralto, Chorus
	At the Beautiful Gate (II)	10:17	Contralto, Peter, John, Chorus
	The Arrest	1:30	Contralto
*	The Sun Goeth Down	9:34	Contralto
	In the Upper Room	17:20	Peter, John, Chorus

The concordance between the sections which are of exceptional quality and which contribute most to the story is both striking and pleasing. However, the problem to which I referred earlier is at once apparent. Probably the most celebrated passage in both works is Mary's sublime aria 'The Sun Goeth Down' which follows the arrest of Peter and John. If this is to be included in its original position, it cannot in itself be a satisfactory conclusion to an evening's concert performance and so it necessitates the addition of Elgar's original conclusion, the section which describes the disciples at prayer in an 'Upper Room'. There is, of course, great merit in sticking, as far as possible, to a composer's original intentions but, as we have seen, Elgar never actually intended the work to conclude at this point in the first place so I do not regard this argument with any great weight. Nevertheless, as a first attempt to construct a possible selection which preserves both Elgar's original order and a modicum of narrative sense, we might propose the following program:

**Part I** **63:51**

	Prologue	6:16	Chorus
	The calling of the Apostles	22:14	Angel, Jesus, John, Peter, Judas, Chorus
	In Caesarea Philippi	4:01	Tenor, Jesus, Peter, Chorus
	The Betrayal	23:20	Tenor, Peter, Judas, Contralto, Chorus
	The Crucifixion	4:36	Mary, John, Chorus
	At the Sepulchre	4:24	Contralto, Chorus

**Part II** **53:24**

	Pentecost	25:20	Peter, John, Contralto, Chorus
	The Arrest	11:04	Contralto
	In the Upper Room	17:20	Peter, John, Chorus

I have included the section 'In Caesarea Philippi' (which includes a rather nice chorus) to portray the period of time between the calling of the Apostles and Jesus' final days. Part I of the concert therefore concludes, appropriately enough, with the crucifixion and a chorus of angels singing a heavenly 'Alleluia!'

In part II we skip over the Ascension and the choosing of Mathias with little regret and plunge straight into the day of the Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues. At the conclusion of this dramatic episode we omit the rather obscure dialogue between Peter and John (At the Beautiful Gate) and move directly to the drama of the arrest followed by Mary's soliloquy and the unsatisfactory conclusion. As can be seen from the timings, the first half of the concert is a little over an hour, the second half just under – a reasonably satisfactory arrangement. To include the orchestral prelude to The Kingdom as well would make the second half of the concert too long.

Is there any way to avoid the unsatisfactory conclusion, though? I believe there is. The Pentecost section concludes with a fine chorus praising the Name of Jesus Christ and marks the point at which the Apostles, fired with the Holy Spirit, are poised to go out into the world to spread the Word of God. If we were to conclude the performance at this point, the narrative would make sense. It would begin with the calling of the Apostles, pass through the terrible events of Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial and the crucifixion but conclude on a high note with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the prospect of a new dawn and a new world. The easiest way to achieve this is simply to omit all the subsequent parts of The Kingdom. This has the effect of reducing the second half of the concert to just 25 minutes so it would be perfectly possible to include the orchestral prelude to The Kingdom as well. This gives us the following program:

<b>Part I : The Apostles</b>	<b>63:51</b>	
Prologue	6:16	Chorus
The calling of the Apostles	22:14	Angel, Jesus, John, Peter, Judas, Chorus
In Caesarea Philippi	4:01	Tenor, Jesus, Peter, Chorus
The Betrayal	23:20	Tenor, Peter, Judas, Contralto, Chorus
The Crucifixion	4:36	Mary, John, Chorus
At the Sepulchre	4:24	Contralto, Chorus
<b>Part II : The Kingdom</b>	<b>33:06</b>	
Prelude	7:46	
Pentecost	25:20	Peter, John, Contraltro, Chorus

but, of course, it omits Mary's exquisite aria.

Fortunately there is a wonderful – indeed miraculous solution to this problem: Mary's aria is sung immediately after the 'Crucifixion' section – i.e. instead of the comments by Mary and John and the chorus of angels at the sepulchre – and concludes the first half of the concert. But where, precisely, is the splice to be made?

The music which describes the death of Christ is a short passage for muted strings under the words “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!” and it is followed by a ravishing passage for chorus who sing the words 'Truly this was the Son of God' sotto voce. There is then a short linking passage on the horns which leads us into the key of C minor and Mary's next words ('The sword hath pierced') begin on the note G. Now this is precisely the key and the note with which Mary concludes the recitative which immediately precedes her aria in The Kingdom on the words 'for it was now eventide.' If the strings were to start to play the introduction to Mary's aria at this point, the transition is seamless. Not only does the music make complete sense, so does the sentiment. Mary's description of the darkness in her heart and of the night, her references to the persecution of the Christ and hopes of the resurrection are entirely appropriate at this point – and what a magical way to conclude the first half of a concert, with the solo violin soaring into the heavens and a concluding pianissimo chord of C major; there will not be dry eye in the house – I guarantee it!

My final recommendation is therefore as follows:

**Part I**

**66:51**

Prologue	6:16	Chorus
The calling of the Apostles	22:14	Angel, Jesus, John, Peter, Judas, Chorus
In Caesarea Philippi	4:01	Tenor, Jesus, Peter, Chorus
The Betrayal	23:20	Tenor, Peter, Judas, Contralto, Chorus
The Crucifixion	2:00	Chorus
The Sun Goeth Down	9:00	Contralto

**Part II**

**33:06**

Prelude	7:46	
Pentecost	25:20	Peter, John, Contralto, Chorus

The work would be billed as:

Selections from  
THE APOSTLES  
and The Kingdom  
by  
Edward Elgar

Obviously it would be an expensive work to produce as it would require 6 soloists, a large orchestra and the hire of all the vocal and orchestral parts for both works but if the proposed idea is considered to have sufficient merit, particularly now that Elgar's music is out of copyright, it might be possible eventually to interest a publisher in publishing a single volume edition. Surely this wonderful music deserves a better fate than that which it currently enjoys?

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