

A requiem for the fallen

Tonight's revival of Elgar's choral work of Remembrance is long overdue

By Jessica Duchen

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When Elgar's small but perfectly formed choral piece *With Proud Thanksgiving* is performed at the Royal Festival Hall tonight, it will be the first time it has been heard in the capital since 1922. The City of London Sinfonia is giving a gala concert in aid of Coins 4 Notes, a joint appeal by the Elgar Foundation and Sargent Cancer Care for Children to support music education and music therapy for young people.

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The concert's conductor, Martyn Brabbins, describes how the idea came about: "We wanted to put on *The Dream of Gerontius* with something unusual alongside it. *With Proud Thanksgiving* seemed appropriate because there was a precedent of sorts: the first two movements of *The Spirit of England*, Elgar's wartime setting of three Laurence Binyon poems, were premiered as a curtain-raiser to *The Dream of Gerontius*, and *With Proud Thanksgiving* is a reworking of the third movement, 'For the Fallen'." The poem features the famous lines: "They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:/ Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn./ At the going down of the sun and in the morning/ We will remember them."

The works are all but forgotten today - and, indeed, *The Spirit of England* was almost never written. In 1915, Elgar, by then 58 and Britain's most prominent composer, was encouraged by the critic Sidney Colvin to write "a wonderful requiem for the fallen" and set Binyon's poems "The Fourth of August", "To Women" and "For the Fallen". But he discovered that a younger composer, Cyril Rootham, a pupil of Elgar's arch-enemy, Charles Stanford, was also setting "For the Fallen". Habitually pessimistic, Elgar at once withdrew his own proposal. He was eventually persuaded to continue by Colvin and Binyon, who told Elgar: "Think of the awful casualty lists that are coming, and the losses in more and

more homes; think of the thousands who will be craving to have their grief glorified and lifted up and transformed by an art like yours..."

Finishing the work proved difficult, so when he was commissioned to write *With Proud Thanksgiving* for the opening of the Cenotaph in London in 1920, Elgar revisited "For the Fallen". He cut five minutes, added a new, more striking opening and removed the soprano soloist. He was supposed to score the accompaniment for military band, but the resulting piece was not used for the Cenotaph ceremony. "I understand that in the end he was advised not to score it for military band," Brabbins says, "because the chances were that then it would never be played anywhere else."

Why the neglect in the concert hall? "You need a special occasion to perform it," Brabbins suggests, "because it is so intimately connected with the soldiers who died in the First World War; and it needs a big chorus and orchestra, yet is only seven or eight minutes long."

'With Proud Thanksgiving' and 'The Dream of Gerontius', Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 (0870 401 8181; www.rfh.org.uk) tonight