

CATHOLIC HEILIG 2003

# O for a Newman and an Elgar for our times



John Gummer

himself conducted his masterpiece. It never fails to move me, but with the Bach Choir and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and, particularly, with the Westminster Cathedral Choir in that supreme setting, it was overwhelming. The Cardinal, introducing it, struck exactly the right note as he reminded the audience that this was an opportunity to come closer to God, to be brought to Him by the profound synthesis of Newman's words and Elgar's music.

We thrilled again to the almost defiant statement of the Faith as Gerontius sings "Firmly I believe and truly" and reached close to the gate of heaven with

the strains of "Praise to the Holiest in the Height". It was an experience not to have missed and a reminder of the role that music can and ought to play in bringing us closer to the Throne of Grace. With that very much in mind, I chatted at the weekend with a friend who is churchwarden of an Anglican church near my home in Suffolk. He was engaged in an argument with his vicar on the need for a decent organist who could live up to the surprisingly fine instrument the village church contained. The vicar was not one who much appreciated the role of music in a service and was taken aback when his churchwarden

reminded him that the appointment of an organist was a job reserved for the parish clergyman — no doubt, said my friend, to underline the importance of music to Christian worship!

Well, for one whose nearest Catholic Church offers an electrified harmonium, this struck a real chord. The only thing I miss about the Church of England is the music. Maybe I shouldn't need it but good music does make all the difference, even if it is confined to three hymns with tunes we know, words that make sense, and sentiments of some substance. That does of course cut out half the offerings found in the average "popular"

hymnal. For failure of rhyme, scansion, and depth, the writer Estelle White takes my prize but she is closely followed by many many others whose banal words have understandably attracted banal music. We do our children a grave disservice if we feed them on "This little light of mine", and "Shine Jesus shine" and never introduce them to "Praise to the Holiest" and "Firmly I believe".

The dumbing down of society at large has been foolishly followed in this respect by all the churches save the Orthodox. As a result we accept appalling double standards. We hear girls and boys at academic schools singing mind-

numbingly rubbishy choruses while, at the same time, they are being taught to appreciate fine paintings and great poetry and being expected to understand the meaning of classical writing and serious historical research.

We believe that young people in our parishes cannot enjoy and profit by singing carefully chosen classics as well as more modern words and music. Indeed, the modern does not need to be bad but we should not be afraid of saying that a great deal is bad and ought to be scrapped without ceremony.

O for a modern Newman and a contemporary Elgar.

I went to the magnificent performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* in Westminster Cathedral last week. We celebrated the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Cathedral when Elgar