

Enterprise in the concert hall

THE concert heard last Saturday in the Civic Hall was perhaps the most important one ever given by the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra (or the Guildford Municipal Orchestra, to give it its former name). The conductor, Vernon Handley, brought to the Guildford public for the first time two major works, each of which gains in stature on repeated hearings.

This should be made particularly easy in the case of Arnold Bax's 4th Symphony in E flat, as it was recorded in the Civic Hall last Sunday, and the disc should be on sale in the shops in time for Christmas.

This exhilarating symphony, one of seven written between the two world wars, was first performed in San Francisco under Basil Cameron. It is a work of massive proportions, and uses a large orchestra including an organ; in fact the seven horns, the three trombones and the two tubas proved to be rather too much for the Civic Hall in terms of sheer volume of sound. But Bax never uses his big forces for improper reasons: the complex first movement shows him to be an extraordinarily colourful composer, utilising his instruments in a markedly 20th-century fashion (melancholy trumpets, for instance), despite the lyrical romanticism that imbues the whole work.

CLEAR FORM

There appear to be many influences in this symphony—I heard reminiscent snatches of Dvorak, for example, in the first movement; Sibelian derivation is less obvious, but the finale has a strong flavour of Delius. The Englishry of Elgar and Vaughan Williams is not here, nor the romanticism of 19th-century German composers, but could the symphony have been quite the same without the potent influence of early Stravinsky?

A point that needs to be stressed is that Bax's symphonies are not formless in structure. The programme-notes quoted Julian Herbage's pronouncement: "Bax's form has always been clear and based on a true development of classical tradition." This needed saying again, as this is not at all the popular conception of Bax's music.

This music is not obvious or predictable, but it is not difficult to listen to either, and its sheer weight of exuberance carries all before it. Nevertheless it needs to be heard more than once, and, as it is an expensive item to put into a concert, most people have never had the chance of getting to know it.

The performance was impressive. Bax may be unfashionable, but if more performances like this are given, or recorded, he is bound to make a comeback before long.

And audiences do like him; Mr. Handley, looking very weary at the end of the concert (he was suffering from flu), was called back by the audience to take a bow no less than five times.

It is interesting and illumina-

ting to compare Bax's achievement in his fourth Symphony with Stravinsky's in his Symphony of Psalms, especially as they were both written at about the same time (1930-31).

It is significant that Stravinsky wrote on the score "composed to the glory of God and dedicated to the Boston Symphony Orchestra"—not, you may notice, dedicated to the Boston Choral Society. Stravinsky is primarily an instrumental composer, and like Beethoven he treats the voice merely as another instrument. He uses a most unusual combination of instruments to achieve what he wants: there are no strings above the cellos, and no clarinets, but plenty of wind instruments, and two pianos.

BOLD COLOURS

I know of no other piece of religious music written this century in which the instrumentation is responsible for such a concentrated feeling of despair and praise. And the despair and praise are not of the superficial "Help me, Lord; thank you God for everything" variety, nor even straightforward muscular Handelian chorus work, but something far more meaningful to contemporary society; it is a kind of sustained spiritual consummation between the music and the listener, and is comparable only to the Passions of Bach and the B minor Mass, despite its short duration of 20 minutes.

I have no doubts about the greatness of The Symphony of Psalms, and it may well become the work by which future generations will remember and venerate Stravinsky.

The performance was not without faults, but these were minor ones. The Festival Choir, in tackling their most challenging piece so far, did a magnificent job, the men's "laudate," for instance, in the last movement, and the altos' "Exaudi" at the beginning of the work. The orchestral ensemble was good at most points, and the balance was right, apart from a slight weakness in the tenors in some of the louder passages.

The other work, which opened the concert, was Boris Blacher's Variations on a Theme of Paganini. The theme is the familiar one used by — among others — Rachmaninov, in his variations for piano and orchestra. The original statement of this theme by solo violin without any accompaniment is, I think, a mistake on the composer's part, as stylistically it bears little resemblance to what follows, and unaccompanied it inevitably has Brahmsian or Rachmaninovian associations.

The variations are good fun and they were well played. Blacher's use of the brass is not very subtle, but his rhythms are ingenious and sometimes jazzy. I particularly took to a 7/8 variation. The precision of the orchestra was, as usual, of a very high order.

The orchestra was led by William Armon and among many "extras" were Mary Rivers at the organ and piano, and Kathleen Dunn-Davies at the piano and the celesta. The concert was the fourth in the "enterprising" series to be given, and the first this season. A programme which made no "popular concessions" almost filled the hall.—C.C.