

The Festival Choir knew greatness

I AM not given to encomiastic utterances, but last Saturday's concert in the Civic Hall provided Guildford with as electrifying a climax to the municipal season as any that I can remember; the response from the audience was overwhelming. A large concourse of singers and instrumentalists gave a stimulating and uplifting performance of William Walton's magnum opus, "Belshazzar's Feast."

Admittedly it would not be very easy to give a workaday account of this modern oratorio with its highly dramatic music and its equally dramatic text, derived by Osbert Sitwell from (as far as I can make out) Isaiah, Daniel and the Psalms; but loose-limbed, imprecise performances are common.

I have never before fully appreciated the rhythmic impact of Walton's music, which Vernon Handley, John Barrow, the Festival Choir and the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra produced between them.

Not that the performance was without occasional error, both of notes and intonation in choir and orchestra, but this was not serious; there was no misjudgment of style or interpretation by any of the performers.

The Festival Choir in singing Belshazzar's Feast at all has reached a new high standard; to have sung it as it did, however, is a feather in its cap that not many choirs in the country could emulate.

The sopranos and contraltos were particularly sound, and maintained their firm tone even when split into four parts. If the whole choir at times, and at certain pitches, sounded rather weak, this is due to an acoustic fault of the Civic Hall, which has never been over-kind either to stringed instruments or to choirs; but the tone quality in the high tessitura of the soprano line was never affected by these quirks, while the unaccompanied tenors and basses at the start of the work set a high standard in rhythmic accuracy and diction.

SUBTLE SOLOIST

John Barrow (baritone) gave a splendidly forthright and confident account of the rewarding solo part. The graphic description of ancient Babylon could perhaps have been slightly more exaggerated, and no doubt John Barrow will acquire the extra "swank" after a few more performances.

The "writing on the wall," however, I have never heard any baritone sing with more subtle effect, and the choir's short sharp yell, when Belshazzar is slain at the hands of Cyrus's Persian army, was highly effective. This shout is the demarcation line between the jittery, uneven, high-tensioned, corrupt palace-life tone-painting which preceded it, and the triumphant, glowing psalm of praise which follows it; it reminds me of the shout of "Barabbas" in Bach's St. Matthew Passion, to a chord of the diminutive seventh—the 18th-century equivalent of a yell.

The Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra, led by William Armon, was assisted by sections of the W.R.A.C. Band and the Guildford Silver Band, sitting in the balcony aisles near the stage, giving a truly three-dimensional effect. It was a relief to find all the bands in agreement over pitch; in fact the only brass instrument out of tune was one of the orchestra's own trumpets.

BALLET SUITE

Before the interval, a much reduced orchestra of some three dozen players gave a pleasing performance of Stravinsky's neo-classic ballet suite—"Pulcinella." In this the composer has taken a number of tunes from Pergolesi's trio sonatas, and arranged them and extended them into a suite of pieces for orchestra. Not great music this, not even great Stravinsky, but a piquant hors d'œuvre with a number of pleasantly contrasting flavours and textures.

Thus ends another highly successful season of music sponsored by Guildford Corporation, and organised and conducted by Guildford's musical director, Vernon Handley. It would seem unlikely that the orchestra and choirs could surpass their present achievements next season to any extent; their present standard and reputation is something of which any town or city should be extremely proud.—C. C.