

G.P.O. can tackle anything

IF I needed any justification for reviewing the recent season by the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra, Felix Aprahamian, of the "Sunday Times," has provided it by calling Vernon Handley "the best English conductor of his generation."

What did the London critics miss by failing to cover any of the G.P.O. concerts? First, the inspiration and integrity. Second some of those rare musical moments we need for spiritual survival. My particular three favourites for the season were the shattering Symphony No. 8 by Shostakovich; Elgar's Second Symphony; and perhaps surprisingly, the Richard Strauss Ein Heldenleben.

The Shostakovich showed that the G.P.O. can tackle anything — and with their own brand of distinction. The Elgar symphony actually overshadowed the rest of its all-British concert, with the work sculpter into its true monumental emotional shape by Handley. While the Richard Strauss caught many listeners unawares by the intensity of his vocabulary. The whole of this Delius/Kalliwoda/Strauss programme came off well though it was not one of the best box-office draws.

After the Brahms First Symphony started the season with a suitable bang, it soon became clear that with Hugh Bean as leader the G.P.O. was likely to inscribe another glowing chapter to its story of nearly a dozen years under Handley. The Guildford "sound" struck Aldershot early, with the combined acoustic clarity of the Prince's Hall and the orchestra's open tone. The climax was the Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 2 in C minor — liltingly full-blooded without the soul-searching melancholia of parts of the later symphonies 4, 5 and 6. The G.P.O. achieved an almost tangible tension in the finale to this extrovert work.

After a couple of concerts for schools, the G.P.O. went on to a popular concert of seven pieces, culminating in the lively Massenet ballet music to Le Cid. It was Tchaikovsky again at the end of October, when Handley illuminated autumn with another of his highlights. This was "Francesca da Rimini," transmitted and almost transmuted with all its overpowering passion, tempestuous fatalism and desperate ferocity. The brooding, blazing essence of the work has never been better portrayed — certainly not in my hearing.

A personal tragedy prevented me from hearing the Enterprising concert of Tippett/Britten/Finzi on November 10th. In retrospect, it seems especially strange that the last work in this memorable programme was "Intimations of Immortality" . . .

Perhaps the Rimsky Korsakov/

Rachmaninov concert a fortnight later did not quite come up to high expectations — which only goes to show you should never anticipate musical pleasure to much.

Jeffrey Siegel was splendid enough technically, but the perfect performance of the Third Piano Concerto by Rachmaninov is rare.

ORCHESTRA'S CHOICE

On December 15th the G.P.O. were ably conducted by a couple of guests, Anthony Ridley and Barry Wordsworth, in a Mozart/Beethoven/Haydn programme, leaving Handley free for a couple of concerts with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. I have heard that this orchestra prefers Handley to any other English conductor for pure musical enjoyment.

The New Year opened with a Sibelius/Beethoven programme. This demonstrated again how excitingly unpredictable a live performance can be. I expected the Sibelius half to be better than the Beethoven.

In fact the G.P.O. played with compulsive precision to produce a memorable Beethoven Eighth. Yet Handley loves Sibelius! The G.P.O. was led on this occasion by John Georgiadis, lately leader of the London Symphony Orchestra.

The following fortnight, the two works with the Elgar Second Symphony were John McCabe's Symphony (Elegy) and Vaughan Williams Serenade to Music. The McCabe work fell rather between two stools and though persuasively played sounded more like a skilled musical exercise than a profoundly-felt creation.

I suppose the programme of the year could be called the one with Peter and the Wolf by Prokofiev; Symphony of Psalms by Stravinsky; and Symphony No. 8 by Shostakovich. The Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor filled the Civic Hall for the Crossley Clitheroe concert. Malcolm Binns revealed measured authority, but one was left with an impression that like other people who have heard this work so often before, he too was searching for something new to say pianistically. The contrasts were more marked than usual.

My slight disappointment of the season was the Wagner/Saint Saens/Rimsky Korsakov afternoon, but the music chosen "plums no great depths" as the programme note said of one of the works.

Then the season came to a spiritual close with "The Dream of Gerontius." Beyond emotion and experience, this is one of the sublime musical creations. Handley handled it with reflective inexorability. The Philharmonic Choir were also moved by the occasion.

The Proteus Choir meanwhile sang in the Serenade to Music, as well as giving one of their

special solo charity concerts at Clandon Park.

A section of the Proteus Choir will also be heard this Saturday at Sutton in another charity concert.

So our thanks once again to Tod Handley for another replenishing, resplendent season. For 1974-75, may I have the temerity to ask for a few of the following — Vaughan Williams, Shostakovich, Sibelius, Strauss, Bourgeois, Bartok and Bax.

John Frayn Turner.