

Musical missionaries— and needed revivals

VERNON Handley and the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra, with the Philharmonic Choir, continued their musical missionary work in the Civic Hall on Saturday. Not so much resurrection this time as an overdue revival of lesser-known (though certainly not lesser) works by 20th-century composers.

Their programme contained four of these — all comparative rarities, all great music of remarkably distinctive kinds and all neglected, at least outside London, for different reasons.

The reason for this neglect in the case of Stravinsky's Violin Concerto is, no doubt, owing to its extreme difficulty. The violin was not, it is said, Stravinsky's favourite instrument and when the virtuoso for whom it was

written first saw just the first fearsome chord and its enormous span, he declared it unplayable. He and a few others have since proved that decision exaggerated.

As usual there is little sentiment about Stravinsky, except perhaps vaguely in the two arias, in the second of which an impersonal, still angular, melody may be heard over a deeply smouldering string bass. In the outer movements, Stravinsky's trick of doubling the solo violin with other, often unlikely, instruments like the tuba, gives the impression of a concertante.

The Welsh violinist Roy Gillard, now sub-leader of the London Symphony Orchestra, gave what sounded like a cool and technically brilliant appraisal of the concerto, especially the challenging and chilling Capriccio — without fervour, but with the aloof and objective detachment it essentially needs.

Less notice appears to have been taken of the centenary of Gustav Holst's birth than that of

his great friend and fellow worker Vaughan Williams. Doubtless one of his finest choral works, the Ode to Death, has been condemned to comparative obscurity by its gloomy title. There is, however, nothing morbid about the Walt Whitman poem — rather a welcome resignation to death as a blessed release from war and distress.

Its unique mixture of modal theme and chromatic development certainly calls for highly refined singing, which it received from the Philharmonic Choir. The delicate wonderment of the words, though not always clearly distinguished; the beautiful pianissimo fading of the end; the enlivening sustaining of soft soprano tone from fortissimo tutti; and the utter suitability of the harp obbligato, all provided fine moments of sheer musical delight. One can ignore the few untidy entrances of the chorus. The tenors, in the wedge formation now so justly favoured, were outstanding in their leads.

Mr. Handley himself showed his technical ability as a conductor to its highest degree in the Meditations on a Theme of John Blow, by Sir Arthur Bliss. This extraordinary work may again be the victim of its title — for most of its lengthy score it is not meditative in content at all, but a vastly varied commentary on a magnificent tune from a Sinfonia for Strings by

the Jacobean master, contemporary and teacher of Purcell.

The Master of the Queen's Music, who composed this excellent orchestral set of variations in 1955, keeps one guessing as to the full theme until the triumphant finale. Previously it is carried, in puzzling snatches, through the peaceful scenes of 23rd Psalm, The Lord is My Shepherd, with remarkable variations of orchestral colour, tinted not a little by exquisite touches on the lighter percussion. The pastoral atmosphere could have been a shade quieter, however.

A frantic interlude illustrating the "valley of the shadow of death," in which Mr. Handley managed the alarmingly mixed time changes and the frightening dissonance with consummate decision, leads to the noble and gradually tranquil conclusion. This is altogether an emotionally satisfying dissertation on a sacred theme — an example of Bliss's excellent economic yet fully effective use of the orchestra.

The short tone-picture by Albeniz which opened the programme, El Corpus en Sevilla, is typical of the colourful Spanish impressionism of a composer who restricted himself mostly to the stage and the piano. The brass may have been a bit heavy for its setting, but the cor anglais and oboe added sweetly to the warm, romantic flavour. — J. C. D.

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