

Philharmonic make a pilgrimage to Canterbury

A MUSICAL pilgrimage to Canterbury was made on Saturday by the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra and Philharmonic Choir. The occasion was a special concert in the cathedral promoted by the South East Music Trust and South East Arts Association.

The orchestra is still gaining in strength, confidence and quality and this particular programme must be accounted another milestone for Vernon Handley. Its climax was the Bliss "Meditations on a Theme of John Blow" and Sir Arthur was in the audience to hear it and acknowledge a reception uninhibited by the surroundings.

To cope with the acoustics of the cathedral, Handley arranged the orchestra in a three-sided layout. First violins, cellos and double basses ranged to his left; woodwind and brass in front of him; and violas and second violins to the right, backed by percussion and timpani. This pro-

duced a veritable trident of sound from the three-prong points of leading violins, brass and percussion/timpani.

In the Bliss work marginally more than the others, the grouping built up to a total envelopment in musical power produced; organlike, organic, in its wholeness. Seldom can the conductor have elicited such emotional response from the G.P.O., which played with what can only be described as passion.

Yet throughout this work, the variations from flailing attack to meditation — enhanced by the cathedral setting — were well observed. Although I was sitting in the same row as Bliss only feet from the players, no coarseness of strong tone was discernible. Handley navigated the eddying vortices and cross-currents skilfully, finding time to beat out a tricky sub-tempo for the cellos.

The finale "In the House of

the Lord" arose to its full stature just before the first violins turned to their last left-hand page, and then the ultimate touches were applied to a structure stimulating, satisfying, and from a highly inventive musical mind. This work and the Bliss Variations for Orchestra premiered by Handley with the L.S.O. are perhaps as near to genius as Bliss can come. The Meditations were certainly aided by being played for a second time in a week by the G.P.O., yielding an extra dimension of assurance, as well as the acoustical dimension of Canterbury!

The same strange and strong resonances burst upon us in the fantasy-overture Hamlet by Tchaikovsky. Here once again were the quaking percussion/timpani, the reverberative strings, as the tragedy was unfolded with drama and passion. And in the special setting, one could not fail to be aware also of that other tragedy of Becket only yards from where we sat. Hamlet was reminiscent of Francesca da Rimini even

before the programme note made the point. And as in Romeo and Juliet, love and death were woven into this forceful score, read and played with full sense of the inexorable urgency of the tragedy portrayed through the language of music. Even with the brass set far back, the trombones powered out.

Tchaikovsky was also the composer of the second work played, Variations on a Rocco Theme for Cello and Orchestra. Rohan de Saram was the soloist in this technically satisfying showpiece. I heard him play it at Dorking some years back and he still brings a panache to its pages.

The instrument came over with clarity, from lowest rumblings to highest little-finger notes. With their craftsmanlike dovetailing the G.P.O. helped to assemble a perfectly-fitting piece. Special moments; the pizzicato string accompaniment to the soloist and then his own later running passages in the allegro vivo. While solo sounds penetrated the cathedral, the grouped woodwind was rather lost somewhere in mid-air.

The Philharmonic Choir repeated its performance of last week when it sang Holst's Ode to Death for Chorus and Orchestra. The setting was of course ideal for this piece and the singers brought it off joyously. That is the right word, for despite its theme, the ode to Walt Whitman's verses rejoices "Come lovely and soothing death." And it ends "I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death." All the nuances were there: the harp droplets, the timeless single flute, the muted strings.

Another night to remember — thanks to the Guildford Philharmonic, leader John Ludlow, the Philharmonic Choir, and Vernon Handley. — J. F. T.