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Entertainment ar

Cathedral setting for War Requiem

THE Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir were transported en masse, with extra support, to Guildford Cathedral for a full performance of Britten's War Requiem.

The requiem is the greatest of Benjamin Britten's non-operatic choral works and was composed, with conviction and intensity, for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral in 1962.

It is not a requiem in the consolatory, soothing or even wholly mournful sense to which we are accustomed, but for the most part a stark, yet absorbing, denunciation of the futility and wastage of war.

The opposing texts of the Latin Mass for the Dead and the bitter, poignantly human poems of Wilfred Owen, written in the blood-stained trenches of France where he was killed seven days before the Armistice of the First World War, create a remarkable testament against man's inhumanity to man — though a degree of peaceful resignation, in Britten's most spiritual style is achieved at the end.

The music contains all the sorrow and irony enshrined in the poems — the persistent use, for instance, of the harsh tritone (the "devil's interval," and also that of the wartime air raid sirens). Its first resolution of acceptance into the assertive key of F major in the final quiet chords of the Kyrie is a masterly touch.

Although the setting of a modern cathedral for its performance is obviously authentic, it still presented difficulties of arrangement and acoustics. The

choir, admirable though its blend sounded, was muffled in some of the heavier choruses, such as the Libera Me, against the full blast of the G.P.O. brass.

But the choir's pianissimo delivery was most accomplished, even from the opening bars of the requiem aeternam, and especially in the remote organ-like chords of Pie Jesu Domine.

The positioning of the chamber orchestra, conducted by John Forster and led by Hugh Bean, and the Bigshotte Boys' Choir above them, both in the north transept, as well as the male soloists in the pulpit, made for a somewhat lopsided effect in many of the more lyrical passages. But it is hard to see what alternative was open to Vernon Handley in his massive task of direction.

I must mention, however, the distantly ethereal effect of the boys' choir, a model of refinement (in the suspenseful Ollertorium introduction, for instance).

The chamber orchestra also set a fine example of discreet accompaniment to the tenor and baritone voices, especially in the quasi-cinematic effects of the long recitative duet. It seemed that out of Battle I escaped. The whispered strings and cymbals of Move him into the Sun also brought a moment of gentle reflection.

The main soloist — the only one who sings with full orchestra — is the soprano, and Sally Le Sage provided a boldly confident interpretation of this challenging role. Her lower notes may sometimes have been lost in the orchestral texture,

but her resonant tone in the brilliant Sanctus, and her smooth swell in the fervent Dies Irae (with its strange 7/8 dotted rhythm) ranked among the most inspiring moments.

Both Alexander Oliver and Christopher Keyte brought much dramatic stress and often tenderness to Owen's nobly ironic words. Mr. Keyte gave a splendid rendering of the sad solo, Bugles sang. It is a pity the words were not more clearly audible throughout the well-fitted cathedral. Mr. Oliver's beautiful ascending descrescendo scale in the Dona Nobis Pacem was a fine technical feat.

The only disappointing chorus was perhaps the Recordare. The altos, in very low register, were scarcely discernible in their entry, while the rest indulged in what seemed to be an unnecessary outbreak of scattered sibilants.

The orchestra, needless to say, took Britten's immensely varied and tantalising score in its stride, led by John Ludlow. Its rare thunders were well controlled by Mr. Handley and the strings produced a sublime tone to match the beauty of the Latin text. — J. C. D.