

It was with something of a patriotic glow that most of us left the Civic Hall on Saturday night after having been reminded by the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir that English composers of half a century ago could write inspiring and exhilarating music. Not a bad thing, perhaps, on the eve of Remembrance Sunday.

It has been fashionable in post-war years to deride even the greater Edwardian masters as four-square has-beens. Yet Hubert Parry and Edward Elgar were at the height of their powers only 20 years before such as Holst and Delius, who are considered the forerunners of the freer modern movement.

Vernon Handley has always been a champion of English music — and his choice of

Majestic music from Elgar and Parry period

programme on Saturday reflected widely ranging styles from a period of just over 20 years.

Elgar's first Symphony, in A flat, received with rapture on its first hearing in 1908, is undoubtedly a masterpiece — and the first symphony by an Englishman to reach the eminence of the great German and Austrian romantics.

He was 50 before he completed it, and the noble first movement has (perhaps cynically) been described as "the British Empire in music." But it must be remembered it was Elgar who discovered this idiom, later to be proclaimed as the epitome of the imperial character.

I have seldom heard the G.P.O. in finer or more whole-hearted form. With Mr. Handley paying strict but exuberant attention to the massive Elgarian score, and Roy Gillard as guest leader, the grandeur and grace of the symphony was thoroughly revealed.

All the familiar Elgarian

fingerprints were clearly marked from the power and breadth of the pervading motif, as first expressed on the cellos, to its thrilling re-cap on the horns; the rushing violins and dogged march of the Scherzo, with its delicate interlude; the serenity of the Adagio; all whipped up to a monumental, rather overbrassy, coda by Mr. Handley.

Delius's Songs of Farewell is another remarkable work. Written in the last years of his life with the help of his faithful amanuensis Eric Fenby, to words from Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass, it expresses not the sadness of farewell, but a pervading spirit of joy and hope — an astonishing paean from a blind cripple and an atheist.

The Philharmonic Choir gallantly maintained Delius's tenuous threads of sound in a complicated web at a constantly high register, even in the occasional poignant softer passages. There was every excuse for some loss of power, particularly among the

sopranos, towards the end of this untypically passionate work.

It was no doubt as a deliberate contrast that Mr. Handley selected another set of Songs of Farewell — the last series of motets written by Parry to a mixture of English poems. They form an intriguing example of sturdy unaccompanied part songs, and were conducted with virility and understanding by Kenneth Lank, Mr. Handley's long-serving assistant conductor and chief choir trainer. The clear diction of the choir in the massed harmonies, a fine round tone throughout changes of tempo and volume, and the antiphonal effects in the eight-part "Lord, let me know Mine End," were the outstanding features. Best of the whole set was the seven-part setting of the John Donne sonnet At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners, where there was a warmth of alto feeling for the fervent prayer.

The programme opened with Holst's evocative Prelude and Scherzo, Hammersmith, originally composed for military band. Here the quietly insistent rhythm of the slowly flowing Thames underlies the sounds of London (the errand boy's whistle, the street musician's trumpet), consciously vulgar touches, but coalescing into an angular fugue with all Holst's orchestral brilliance. Though 45 years old, it seemed the most up-to-date work of the whole evening. — J. C. D.

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