

An enterprising concert

Guildford PO/Handley
Civic Hall, Guildford

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Do you ever scan the announcements of forthcoming concerts, conclude that no programme gratifies your fancy, and resign yourself to another evening with the box? The desirable programme may well be taking place, not in your own Metropolis, but somewhere not far away. How many concert goers, living in London, take note of the music going on in Watford and Guildford, now that the BBC no longer trails live concerts outside the capital?

Guildford has its own Philharmonic Orchestra, a professional body drawn mostly from London players. It gives two concerts a month, on Saturdays or Sundays in Guildford Civic Hall, a pleasant auditorium, though rather raw and reverberant in noisy orchestral music. Since 1962 the musical director has been Vernon Handley, a busy conductor with a special flair for British music of this century's first half, though his repertory is wide. On Saturday I drove a few miles on the A3 to near him conduct the Guildford PO in Holst's *Hammersmith*, Elgar's first symphony and, with Guildford Philharmonic Choir, Delius's *Songs of Farewell*. It was designated an

"enterprising concert", meaning that the music is not bread-and-butter classical favourites; many of this season's programmes could be flown under the same banner (what about Strauss's *Don Quixote* and Rachmaninov's third symphony on December 13?) .

The finest performance was of the Delius, whose muted ecstasy was strongly conveyed by a secure, enthusiastic choir and by Mr Handley's passionately sympathetic conducting, scrupulous about melodic line and harmonic detail and firmly-filled musical structure, most uplifting. He was tough, and again sympathetic, with the eccentric yet perfectly sensible counterpoint of *Hammersmith*.

In Elgar's first symphony the chosen tempi sometimes misfired, the Adagio sounding rather fast and chilly, the Allegro of the finale too slow and heavy, requiring a grinding gear-change before long. The basic spirit of the symphony was nevertheless projected aright, from the initial motto-theme, touchingly enunciated, to the grand conclusion, though the Scherzo's trio melody emulated the Cheshire Cat. It was a greatly enjoyable concert, which also included Parry's *Songs of Farewell*, and assured me that Guildford's "enterprising concerts" are worth any enterprising concertgoer's attention.