

# ment and the Arts

## St. John Passion work retains benign power

THE St. John Passion by Bach was given in Guildford Cathedral on Saturday evening to a crowded congregation. Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra and Philharmonic Choir were joined by six soloists. Vernon Handley had risen from a sick bed to conduct this concert and the presence of this familiar rehearsal stool reminded us that he was not yet fully well.

Unlike parts of the Matthew Passion, the St. John seems to eschew overt drama, instead igniting a slow-burning fuse and achieving its cumulative effect in this way. And as the programme pointed out, two and a half centuries of sophistication is not necessarily the best training for mankind if its full force is to be appreciated today. Yet it is a work which retains a benign power.

### Rare unisons

Handley was fortunate in his musical forces. The basis of the score remained the reliable strings of the G.P.O. with woodwind the only other orchestral section present. John Ludlow and Hugh Bean steered them through the 180 pages and two hours of music with their twin

second-violin leaders also prominent.

The Philharmonic Choir produced delineation and direction throughout while the acoustics lent a certain extra stature and dimension to the high registers. Ethereal or sprightly, introspective or impassioned, they moulded some rare unisons.

The first excitement engendered was after the interval with real Bach-like phrasing in *If this Man were not a Malefactor, and O King of Glory. The complex four-part Crucify Him, and We Have a Law, followed by Away with Him, sounded in this setting aptly like a vocal crowd-scene.*

The Philharmonic Choir burned the fuse progressively more fiercely through *Write Thou Not, See Him Now to Ah! Lord When my Last end is Come. The well-judged well-rounded choruses and chorales yet managed precipice-edge endings, tribute to the choir and Tod Handley.*

Interlaced between choral sections, the six soloists sang to the harpsichord accompaniment of John Forster. All the soloists were fairly young, yet none sounded less than

equal to the demands of this Passion. Yet if there were a slight flaw it would be the underplaying of the passionate aspects.

### Sound soloists

This was in no sense so with the principal singer Julian Pike. His attractive strong tenor came across with feeling and complete clarity of articulation. Meryl Drower too sang movingly and accurately, both spirited and sensitive especially in *O Heart, melt in Weeping with woodwind accompaniment. She is in the best English oratorio tradition. Patricia Taylor started rather inconsistently but finished finely in All is Fulfilled to cello support.*

Michael Bauer sang a sound bass as *Christus*, perhaps needing more passion; Ronald Murdock had style and shading as the other tenor; and Norman Wellsby gave us a buoyant second bass, emphatic and resounding where wanted. He had taken over at very short notice.

A silence of several seconds preceded the applause at the end — eloquent evidence of the inner quality of this work and its performance. — J. F. T.