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Resplendent season's end

A SEA Symphony by Vaughan Williams brought the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra's season to a resplendent end at the Civic Hall on Saturday evening. And so integral to this score was the Philharmonic Choir that the effect sounded more like a single instrument than orchestral and choral forces.

This first symphony dates from the historical/musical turning point of 1910 and while youthfully optimistic it encompasses elements of eternity, both in the music and with the words of Walt Whitman.

Other composers have written of the sea, including Delius and Debussy, but this is a major conception. The undulating waves, the heaving breast of the swell, these were there from the first stirring words Behold the Sea Itself.

In one of his most translucently illuminating readings, Vernon Handley built from this beginning, brushing in the

myriad moods and tones, so that the colour changes of sea, ship and sky sailed across our mental horizon.

Both soloists were introduced in the opening movement. Elizabeth Tippett revealed her operatic feeling and her high notes floated over with an especially ethereal sound. Peter Knapp sang the baritone line with purity, yet perhaps calling for a bit more salty flavouring. After all, the theme was not only ships but "time and space and death."

In the slow second movement On The Beach, the orchestral quality came through and as Knapp and the choir joined, it was easy to agree with Whitman that "A vast similitude interlocks all." In the superbly structured scherzo of The Waves, the choir again rode the score buoyantly, complete with fine diminuendos. The strong male sections now round off a robust, sensitive group.

Harp, strings, horns all introduced The Explorers in "the teeming spiritual darkness." But from the word wandering the mood was positive, the tension tightened — despite a choral slip somewhere among these pages. "After the seas are all crossed . . ." and Handley seemed to ignite a deeply exciting sense of eternal exploring through regions infinite. Which is what music and life are all about.

The concert opened with the brittly brilliant cul-de-sac of Stravinsky's Symphony in Three Movements. The G.P.O. was ranged in its full 77-strong splendour, with timpani and percussion to the right and John Forster on the piano at the far left.

Dating from 1945, the work represents in the composer's words "this our arduous time of sharp and shifting events, of despair and hope, of continual torments and at last, cessation and relief." Hence

the harmonic tension between major and minor, the conflict of opposing tonalities.

The G.P.O. leader John Ludlow, picked and pricked its way stylishly through the broken glass fragmentation of this musical equivalent to Auden's poetry — urban, ambivalent, neurotic, thistly, intellectual, modern, splintery, satirical, lyrical.

Decisive timpani, shapely woodwind, eloquent horns, marked the first movement with its fading string close. After more woodwind and horn distinction in the cracked crystallography of the *andante*, the orchestra returned to the tense scoops of almost human outcries.

Thanks to Handley, the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir for a season which has echoed the words of Walt Whitman: "O farther, farther, farther sail." And if you want to hear Handley again this week, he is conducting the final G.P.O. concert of the season at the Festival Hall on Thursday. — J. F. T.