

# Cathedral concert of well-chosen music

IT is no easy task to choose music suitable to the mixed acoustics of Guildford Cathedral. Rarely have I heard any orchestral concert - and never any choral - which entirely satisfied the ear.

But Vernon Handley and the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir came as near to it as anyone in their utterly satisfying programme on Saturday.

Apart from Britten's *Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes*, which of course have an essentially open-air atmosphere of their own, the music was for those initiated into the sacred mysteries of the freedom acquired by composers of the early part of the century, liberated from the shackles of their maudlin Victorian predecessors.

Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* is not really at home anywhere outside a cathedral. It is music one does not want to analyse, but to relax and bathe in the glories of modal harmony, so discreetly mixed with what must be called V.W.'s natural folk idiom.

Despite its name, there is nothing rhapsodical about it (in Tallis's days Fantasy meant something different), but its smooth gravity never palls. As played by the G.P.O. strings, with the guest leader, Bernard Partridge, in splendid tone, heading the quartet, this wonderful transcription of the simple tune written in 1567 by Tallis for the Archbishop of Canterbury, seemed as wedded to our modern cathedral as it was to Gloucester's in 1910.

It might be carping to complain that with such space available the division between the split orchestra might have been wider to give true echo effect.

Herbert Howells, who at 85 still teaches at the Royal

College of Music, had much in common with Vaughan Williams, although 20 years younger. Both were pupils of Stanford, but in his *Hymnus Paradisi* Howells seems to have absorbed more of the traditional oratorio theory than his older contemporary.

It is, nonetheless, an important and, in places, highly stirring work of decidedly Christian conviction. It has the mood and purpose of a Requiem, having been written as a memorial after his only son's untimely death. But, though starting and ending with a solemn chanting of the Requiem, it does not follow the orthodox Mass, being based on the Psalms, the Book of Common Prayer and the Salisbury Diurnal.

The contemplative beginning gives way to radiant confidence in the setting of Psalms 23 and 121 and tranquillity leads, with gradual certainty, to a dynamic outburst of splendour, dying with Alleluias tenderly away to the final calm Requiem aeternam.

There is nothing in the way of arias for the two soloists - they are well co-ordinated with the chorus throughout most of the work - but Meryl Drower gave graceful, yet well-projected clarity to her soprano part, generally well pitched. Robin Leggate was sometimes too metallic in partnership, but produced some appealing lyrical tenor tone in his opening of *The Lord is My Shepherd*.

The choir was always well co-ordinated - and well managed by Mr. Handley - and the female voices merged quite beautifully in the intricate texture of the Sanctus. Most of the words were inevitably lost in the great heights, but the choir certainly achieved their expressively.

Surprisingly, Britten's *Sea Interludes* - the finest evocation of Britain's heritage ever com-

posed - came over very well in the lofty nave, thanks to a most understanding performance by the orchestra. *Dawn and Moonlight* may have been less misty than usual, and the tympanists' thunder in the *Storm* too insistent for the turmoil of the waves, but the eternal surge of the North Sea on Britten's beloved East Coast was ever present.

John C. Dodds.