

Civic Hall, Guildford

Blacher's Requiem

Vernon Handley and the Guildford Philharmonic have a reputation for larding their programmes with unfamiliar or neglected music mostly of the 20th-century, mostly of a kind not likely to be washed up by eddies of fashion. Music for the most part not extravagant or outlandish but just good, worth knowing yet (as often happens) temporarily forgotten. They chose a rare fish for Saturday evening's concert—the Requiem Op 68 by Boris Blacher. Commissioned by the Vienna Konzerthaus and first given there in 1959 under Solti, with the chorus of the Singakademie.

Blacher, who died five years ago, was a Berlin composer of Baltic origin. Though musically speaking he went his own way he was not a recluse or an eccentric but a friendly, sociable man, very much part of Berlin musical life, respected as a teacher. He kept his head and his independence through the period of what somebody recently described as "serial terrorism." His music is dry, carefully calculated, economical, not cold or heartless. It has something of the bracing Berlin climate and something of the city's humour. His orchestral concertante *Music and Paganini Variations* won a certain popularity in the 50s and 60s, as did the satirical opera *Preussisches Märchen*.

The Requiem, which lasts about 45 minutes, is written for full chorus, normal orchestra with four percussion players, soprano and baritone soloists. The language makes much use of the interval of a semitone—not only for flavouring the harmony but for themes moving stepwise in semitones and for

wide-ranging chromatic scales rising or falling (in the *Sanctus* for example), through several octaves. The *Dies irae* ends with a big coda, several pages long, in which tersely syllabic "Amen's" are sung against the same word spun out by other voices on long lines of triplets. Orchestral support for voices, solo and choral, is often deliberately exiguous.

The Guildford Philharmonic Choir had clearly worked hard, long and devotedly at the score. To say that they had mastered all the problems would be an exaggeration. Blacher's writing does not present the sheer difficulty of placing the notes that daunts singers of much of the music of the period, and his intervals are mainly small, but the precision and bareness of the style mean that everything must be, and remain for long periods, bang on. There were signs of flagging here and there but the spirit was soon renewed. How many amateur choirs in Germany or Austria, I wonder, would tackle this work and do it as well as this?

The soloists, Vivien Townley and Ian Caddy, were excellent. Their singing of the quietly rocking *Domine Jesu* suggested that there maybe more lyricism in the score than appears at first hearing. The orchestra has a comparatively easy time. Their good quality had been shown in the preceding work, Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, whose melodic wealth, made Blacher's austerity seem positively self-denying. In the songs, Gwyn Griffiths displayed a contralto voice full of promise. She must however learn to keep still on the platform and to move both words and tone forward: feeling by itself isn't enough.

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