

GPO excels in Elgar's *Dream*

AN altogether satisfying performance of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* brought Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra's season to a close on Sunday.

Satisfying because it found the Philharmonic Orchestra playing Elgar in the most compelling way under conductor, Vernon Handley — as good an account of an Elgar composition as his recording of the Elgar Symphony No. 2; satisfying because the trio of soloists sounded so right in their respective roles; and because the Philharmonic Choir achieved many a moment of choral beauty.

There is a distance about much of Gerontius, but it is one which is punctuated by moments of more immediate and earthy force. It was this understanding and spiritual feeling that came through so clearly, in addition to the sense

of reassurance that underlies the whole work.

It is a feeling that must grow from the centre, thus all credit to Handley for nursing the music along with care and deftness which allowed the natural poetry, whether it be the anguish of Gerontius, the comfort of the priest and the angel, or the spikiness of the demons, to speak for itself.

The composition's overall form — and thus the performance as an entity — felt utterly right.

Leading a strong trio of soloists, Kenneth Woollam brought to the tenor title role a strength which was also capable of embracing the work's more spiritual moments, such as the line *Santus fortis, Sanctus Deus*, which had an ethereal quality. Woollam seemed to take a little while to get fully into the music, but once there he sang fluently and with feeling, but never melodramatically.

No such problem for

Michael Rippon, whose priest was a commanding and reassuring figure from the very first note. Fine tone and an eloquent sense of anguish were to be heard in his Angel of Agony.

Much more "comfortable" was Bernadette Greevy's Angel, who almost motherly (although Gerontius tells us the angel is a "him") in her creamy, smooth tone. Miss Greevy moved from a perhaps over-dignified start to give a most lyrical and often mellow rendering of Elgar's music.

This was also a characteristic of much of the Philharmonic Choir's singing. Although the choir's initial singing was bland and the thinnish tone of the choir of archangels was more tentative than distant, there was much to enjoy. They made a splendid sound in the final chorus of the first part of the oratorio, hit the first line of *Praise to the Holiest* with a firmness which was sustained throughout that chorus and brought a graphic clarity to the demons' invective.

Finally, the orchestra; a fine performance, whether accompanying the soloists, providing the brilliant introduction to Gerontius's final passage or responding to the Gerontius *Credo* with a climax worthy of the moment.

Robert Benjafield