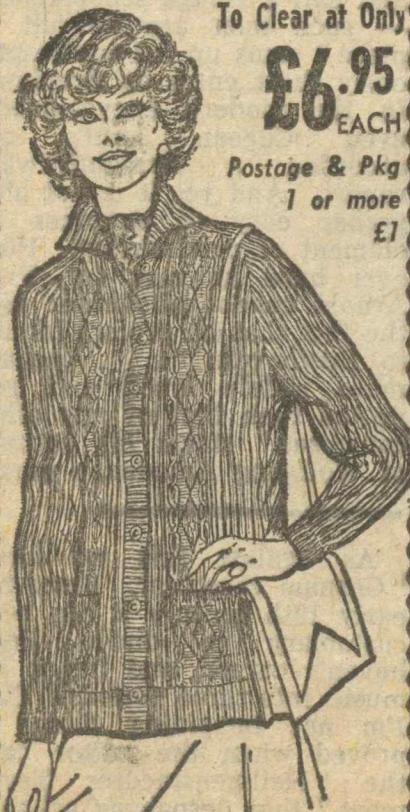


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# RISING STAR OF AN UNFLAMBOYANT CONDUCTOR

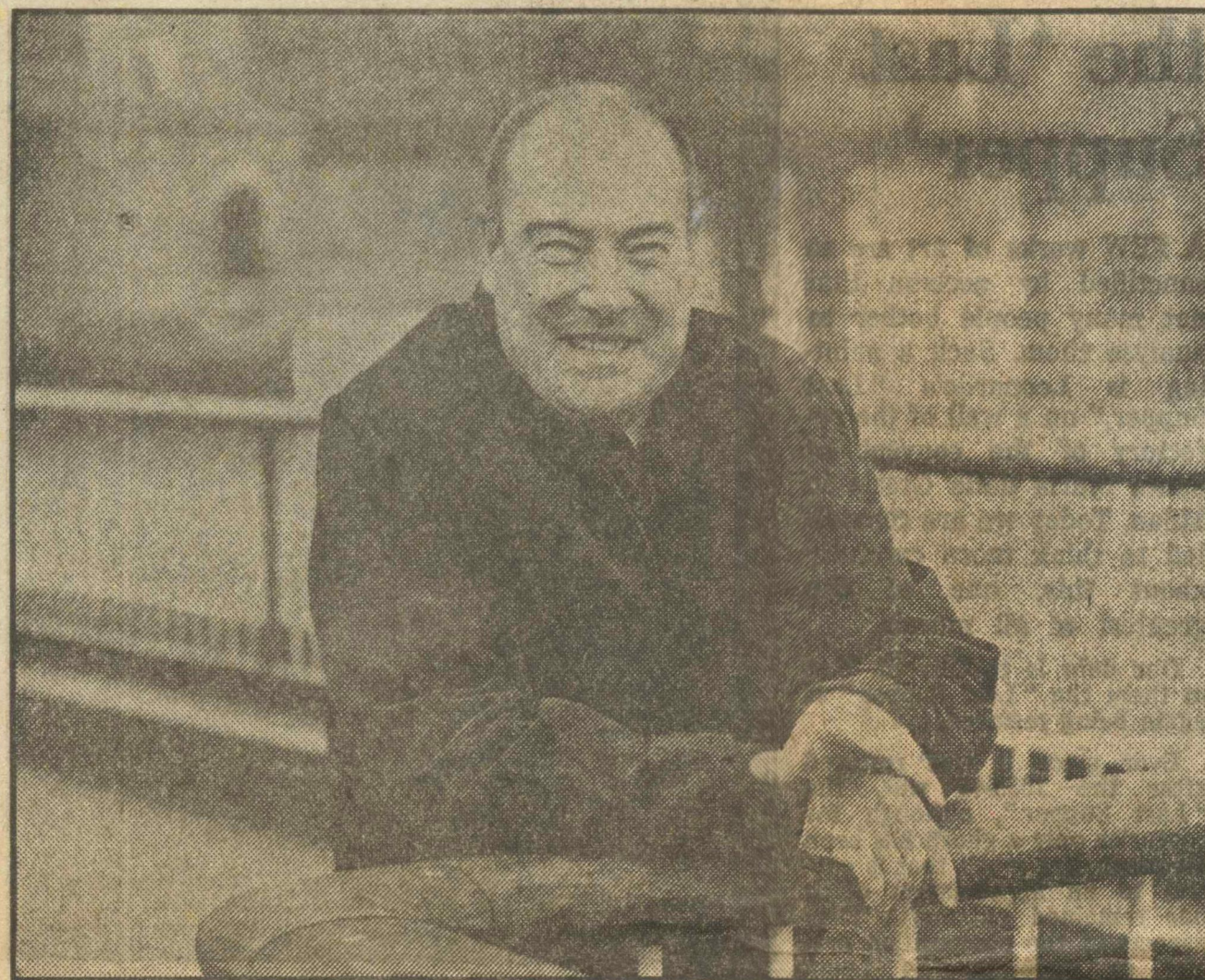
**T**HERE is a certain image attached to the profession of conductor — artistic looks, dramatic, flamboyant, often a tricky temperament — which Vernon Handley is the first to admit he fits in no way at all.

He is almost aggressively down-to-earth, looks like a tough TV cop and has so assiduously cultivated his non-traditional image that he believes he has hindered his career by it. "Conductors who are good self-publicists invariably become better-known and therefore a far greater draw for the public," he said.

At 53 he has achieved the greatest accolade in what is rapidly becoming a distinguished career — he has been appointed associate conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and conducted it for the first time this week at the Royal Festival Hall.

Another factor he believes has not helped his career is championing often-neglected British twentieth-century composers, following the footsteps of his mentor and idol, Sir Adrian Boult.

Interest is reviving in one of his favourites, Sir Arnold Bax, whose centenary it is this year, and he was pleased to include two of Bax's lesser-known



Vernon Handley . . . down-to-earth and looking like a TV cop. Picture by KENNETH MASON.

works in Monday's concert.

The composer was an Englishman who took a passionate interest in Celtic culture, using it for much of his musical inspiration. Vernon Handley feels much the same.

Far from spending his whole life in the cultural hot-spots of Europe, when he is not conducting he

flees to his home in the countryside of the Wye Valley, where he lives with his second wife, Victoria, who is, he said proudly, "about half my age," and their two young children.

There he studies and photographs wild birds, grows old roses and makes furniture, including the family dining-table and eight chairs, completed

over two years. These disparate interests are linked to each other, and to music, by what he describes as "the form and architecture of things, which is to me one of the most fascinating aspects of life and a fundamental quality of good music."

Perhaps one reason for the unconventional approach of Vernon Handley (known in the music world as Tod, because he

"toddles" with his feet turned in) is his very ordinary background. His mother was a piano teacher but there was no musical tradition in his family and he is entirely self-taught. He never considered another career because, he said, "for as far back as I can remember, music made me feel peculiar inside."

He wanted to be a musician but a hand injury at the age of eight stopped that. As he was good at singing and harmony studies, he began to study scores. He eventually went to Oxford to study English philology but immediately became involved in music and won a competition to conduct the university orchestra.

"I had a little previous experience with the school choir and in the forces," he said, "but then there were none of the present-day competitions for young conductors and one had to start from scratch. There were one or two marvellous orchestral musicians from whom I learnt a lot but most of us were muddling through."

After Oxford he took "any menial piece-work that allowed me to study scores in quiet moments," and was also training on double bass, violin and trombone, three instruments which, he said wryly, he can make sound identical.

While at Oxford he wrote to Sir Adrian Boult for advice and received "a standard, off-putting reply." Having grabbed every opportunity to conduct on an amateur basis, with church and Women's Institute choirs over two years, he phoned Sir Adrian and asked to attend a rehearsal of a Holst concert. "I was amazed that he remembered me," said Vernon, "but he said, 'Oh, Handley, I thought I had put you off. Well, we had better have a talk'."

This was in 1956 and for some years after that,

orchestras such as Royal Philharmonic, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Hallé and the LPO, especially for recording.

His belief is that British conductors necessarily have a broad range "because our home-grown composers are held in such low esteem that we cannot get away with promoting just them, as Europeans do with their national composers." He has done much to establish the reputation of British composers abroad and always asks to include such works in programmes abroad.

His strong British connections continue — he is principal guest conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, will be artistic director of the 1985 Norwich and Norfolk Triennial Festival and will be musical director of the Great British Music Festival, which involves four London orchestras playing at the Royal Festival Hall, next year.

He receives more than 100 scores each year from hopeful young British composers, of which, he said, "at least a dozen are very worthwhile performing, but getting the opportunity to do so is another matter. I have to keep hoping that British music will be fashionable one day."

**BY AVRIL GROOM**

said Vernon, "I went to about 80 per cent. of his rehearsals and my training consisted of discussing them with him over coffee afterwards."

The two became friends — "I think we sparked each other off and though he usually won our tussle, he was always very generous," he said. Boult first paid him the compliment of watching him conduct, as an amateur, in 1958 and canvassed for his first professional engagement, with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, in 1960.

After that, professional engagements came thick and fast, with major