

100-strong choir for 'Messiah'

THE traditional Easter offering of Handel's *Messiah* was made to an appreciative audience at the Civic Hall on Sunday by Guildford Philharmonic Choir, singing (latterly, at least) with spirit and punctilious accuracy under the direction of its regular chorus-master, Kenneth Lank.

The choir was at its fullest strength — but the orchestra, thankfully, not so, equating more to Handel's original intentions in size, though a certain solid basis was lost in the larger choruses by the unavoidable lack of organ power.

Although the first part of England's greatest oratorio was rather dry and uninspiring, the singers took fire after the interval and, though it was not perhaps the most dramatic of *Messiahs*, it was certainly the clearest and most precise I have heard for many years.

The sopranos, though in excellent unity, seemed a little over-stretched towards the end (as well they might!), but the mellow alto section and the sturdy male contingent were effective throughout. The great fugal *Amen* was sung with impressive conviction.

The soloists were all highly competent and experienced oratorio vocalists and added greatly to the evening's enjoyment. Clarity of expression and articulation seemed to be their watchword.

Catherine Wyn-Rogers's fine contralto made a most fervent declamation of *He was De-*

spised. Hers is a true deep contralto timbre, capable of moving expression, of which, I am sure, much more will be heard soon. It was the most emotional aria of the evening.

Another newcomer to the oratorio scene was Maria Bovino, a promising young soprano of Italian extraction, who sang her immortal aria, *I know that my Redeemer liveth*, with sympathetic sincerity and, with rather more variable pitch, the jubilant *Rejoice greatly* with joyous conviction. It was surprising to hear such ringing high notes from such a diminutive frame.

Both men soloists performed their roles with comfortable ease and admirable breath control in Handel's long running scales. Peter Hall was given to

rather staccato emphasis in his recitatives, but was never at fault in his high ranges.

Henry Herford was equally safe and steady, with fine tonal control, in his bass solos, and held his own nobly with Clifford Haines's resounding instrument in *The Trumpet shall Sound*.

Handel gives plenty of scope for speed to conductors, and Mr. Lank maintained a steady and deliberate beat for most of the choruses, with the choir admirably observant of unanimity in all exits and entrances.

With over 100 on stage, his control and careful direction made for an eminently well-balanced and worthy performance.

John C. Dodds.