

People

Baton charge

SARAH JANE CHECKLAND visits the conductor Vernon Handley

THIS was to have been a particularly busy month for Vernon Handley. The skilful rhythm of his baton had been chosen to mark two major commemorative concerts. The first was a celebration of Sir Thomas Beecham a week last Friday and the second, a 50th anniversary of Elgar's death next Thursday. Handley was all ready to don his tails for Beecham when fate struck in the form of mumps.

Borne home to the rolling woodlands of the Wye valley, he was told by his doctor to lie low until tomorrow, when he might start some tentative rehearsing. Instead, although "feeling rotten" and still with a temperature, he was up and about last week, able to nip down to Bristol to visit his first wife.

He would not reveal why he defied doctor's orders and rewarded his second wife Victoria for her excellent nursing in this way. Suffice to say that such determination will most probably get him to the Royal Festival Hall, the rostrum and Elgar on time. With luck he will also manage to persuade the librarian of the London Philharmonic Orchestra to surrender the scores, currently held back for fear he might infect them.

Handley, 53, is more like a man mountain than the regular image of a willowy conductor. Although nicknamed "Tod" because of his toddling manner of walking, he is no twinkletoes. His jowls are heavy like a bulldog's, whether he has mumps or not; his hair crew-cut to resemble a receding treeline.

On a normal day, Handley says, "I wear them all out at home". His

activities range from shooting birds (both with intent to kill and to photograph), playing with his children, Fand, five (named after a piece by the British composer Bax) and Finian, three (named after the giant), and sawing yew trees to make handsome furniture for his home. When at work in his study, he often breaks through the idyllic silence of the valley "singing and hollering at the top of my voice, imitating the oboe".

Superficially, he seems an unlikely chap to be conducting Elgar, perhaps our most reflective British composer. And when he says, "I adore the composer. Wonderful!" he makes his hero sound more like Elton John. Yet Handley regards himself as a true soulmate of Elgar, for two reasons. The first is that they were both self-taught.

"From the age of eight", says Handley, "when I taught myself theory of music, I had no wish to play an instrument well, but I had a fierce desire to hear music in my head." Although it was philology he studied at Oxford, he spent all his free time practising "throughout the night". When he came down he worked as a nursery gardener, bricklayer and petrol pump attendant during the day, and as a conductor of amateur orchestras and choirs in the evening.

Whereas Elgar made ends meet as a bandmaster for a county mental home, Handley was "kept alive one year by the Women's Institute". His first professional engagement came in 1960, conducting the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

The other reason for the affinity with

Elgar is Handley's conducting technique, which is quite the opposite from his hearty personal image. As he says: "The majority of conductors get a sense of power. I get a sense of terror. Conducting for me is not the imposing of my will on an orchestra but the discovery with them of a work".

Handley learned much of his technique from Sir Adrian Boult, the great champion of Elgar. "When he was getting older I did a lot of rehearsing and recording for him. For a number of years we were very close." From Boult he learned not to give the audience the cheap thrill of flamboyant conducting (one Hoffnung cartoon shows Boult conducting with his wrists in handcuffs). "Music isn't mime. You shouldn't fraudulently convince people that they have heard what they haven't", Handley says.

Handley's great break came in 1970 when he took over an important London Symphony Orchestra concert after André Previn fell ill. Since then he has recorded some 30 LPs, all the work of English composers, and he conducts 60 to 70 concerts a year. Last year he was made associate conductor of the London Philharmonic, and next year he becomes principal conductor of the Ulster Orchestra.

Yet Handley could never be termed an establishment figure. He may get letters from admirers all over the world, but "there are some people in the music establishment to whom I have never been introduced." He gives short shrift to "jet-set musical careers that are little to do with the work, more to do with PR".

After Thursday's concert he will return home across the Severn Bridge with Victoria and the children. Victoria ("26, or is it 27? I can never remember") says she is happy to be an "old-fashioned supportive wife" and tells how she fell in love "when I was in his youth choir. Sounds seedy, doesn't it?"

Although they both come from Guildford, Handley regards himself as a mixture of Welsh and Irish, and Wales is now their home. "The further west I get the better. I spin to the west because of the Welsh and the Irish in me," he says, and adds: "We are also near Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Holst country".

Frank Herrmann



Victoria and Vernon Handley: "The further west the better"