

Powerful performance of Walton work

WHEN William Walton wrote *Belshazzar's Feast* he wrote in a far more direct and powerful way about the events than his classical forebears in their oratorios, but then he did choose one of the Bible's more colourful happenings.

The work needs thrust, power and an overall feeling of size in the Berlioz mould and this it received from a performance last Saturday by Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra and the Guildford Philharmonic Choir, performing in the Civic Hall.

In a programme of British music it was unfortunate that

Vernon Handley was unable to conduct the concert due to a kidney infection. Apart from the obvious feelings which the audience had for the health of a well-loved musician, there was also a pretty morbid feeling among members of the choir, many of whom did not know of the forthcoming change of conductor until they saw Brian Wright on the podium for Saturday's final rehearsal. He being the fourth conductor they had faced in the inadequate time scheduled for preparing this tricky Walton music, there was an understandable lack of security which lasted from a steady but unspectacular first *Thus spake Isaiah* until the blockbusting *Yea, drank from the sacred vessels*. This latter line arrived

with all the necessary force and, as if they had discovered that, yes, they could indeed hit this work with the necessary verve, they unburied their heads from their scores and produced music which was well projected, well balanced between the voices and never sounded, unlike other occasions, as though it was a futile battle between the choir and the orchestra. The *Praise ye...* section was a rich and rhythmically alive sound and the work's one reflective passage, just before the momentous final impressive dash, was a smooth and well shaped choral line. It was good to hear this choir realise its potential.

Brian Wright controlled his huge forces with a fine feeling for the sheer weight of the

work. He had, in his baritone soloist Brian Rayner Cook, a fierce, almost snarling at times, interpreter who really brought his narrative to life in a dramatic, telling fashion.

As for the orchestra, they revelled in this orgy of notes (in fact, one or two snare drum trumpet bars were less than impeccably controlled), producing the type of virility intended by Walton.

Earlier, Wright conducted the *Sea Interludes* from Britten's *Peter Grimes*. He achieved the tautness and textural clarity but sometimes at the expense of the eerie, haunting atmosphere which should pervade the Dawn and Moonlight interludes.

In William Mathias's Horn Concerto the composer himself

conducted. It is a piece written for a festival and, for the greater part of its length, exercises the technical skills of the soloist — in this case the proficient Hugh Potts — in his ability to play tricky rhythms and at speed with more than a degree of tongue twisting involved.

Although a comparatively light work, it suddenly stops and takes a serious look at itself in a nocturnal third movement in which soloist Potts meandered gently along a smooth, elegaic path, accompanied discreetly by the upper strings while cellos and timpani provided an almost perpetual grumbling murmur — a most effective combination of sounds.

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