

# 'War Requiem' in cathedral

BRITTEN'S *War Requiem* is, by any standards, a great work — probably his greatest and certainly the greatest ever written in the cause of peace.

Many composers in the past two centuries have set, in many different styles, the Latin text of the *Mass for the Dead*. But only the convinced pacifist Benjamin Britten has dared to mix with it the poetry of an English contemporary victim of war.

As a result no music could more vividly or pitifully express the poignancy and passion of the sacrifice and futility of war.

It is difficult to realise that this *Requiem* is now 25 years old and is now being sung and heard, 10 years after the composer's death, by choirs and audiences who have no direct experience of war. But there is no glorification of battle — only anger and deep sympathy.

A cathedral setting is obviously ideal for its performance — the first was in the resurrected Coventry Cathedral in 1961 — and at Guildford last Saturday it received a deeply-felt, sometimes fervent, treatment from Guildford Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra, augmented by the University of Warwick Chorus and the boy choristers of the cathedral.

The conductor was Simon Halsey, choral director of both

choirs, in his first major engagement since taking over at Guildford in 1984.

At first sight the massed forces looked almost too large for the occasion, but they were so judiciously spread that there was little distortion from the cathedral's awkward acoustics and Mr. Halsey, in dedicated and ardent control, managed the dynamics to perfection, even on occasion obtaining degrees of *pianissimo* unexpected in the circumstances.

In the fairly rare moments of full power, the large chorus produced a volume of co-ordinated sound splendid in its grandeur and never false to Britten's unique harmonic patterns. The chattering and shuddering crescendo of the transition for *Sanctus* to *Benedictus*, with fading echoes of the fierce *Dies Irae*, produced effects I have never heard in the cathedral.

The choirboys, too, elevated to the organ gallery, provided several ethereal *ripieno* moments, their alternating treble and alto lines in the *Offertorium* refined in silvery tone and clarity.

One of Britten's imaginative plans was the separation of the Latin text to soprano soloist and choir and the moving poems of Wilfred Owen to the two male soloists, accompanied by a smaller chamber orchestra.

This arrangement most vividly expresses the bitterness and final resignation of the war-worn poet, emphasised or

placated by the age-old words of the *Mass*. But the bitterness is maintained throughout by the *leit-motiv* use of the tritone (once called "the devil in music"). I doubt that the modern generation knows (though Britten did) that it was the interval used for the last war's air-raid warnings!

One of England's leading sopranos, Sheila Armstrong, was in full and sympathetic voice, radiantly so in her entry into the *Sanctus*, ringing out against the carillon of bells from the percussion section. Her *Lacrimosa* was a tenderly compassionate model of grief.

Early on I had doubts whether the tenor soloist had the power to fill the cathedral with his seemingly dry tone, but it soon became evident that Christopher Gillett's clear articulation was a distinct necessity for many of his passages — the touching phrases of "Move him into the Sun," for instance, and the suddenly unaccompanied climactic line "I am the enemy you killed, my friend" in the solemn *Libera Me* revelations.

Michael George made fine use of his grave, deep baritone both in his duets with the tenor and in one of the few theatrical episodes, the appeal for God's curse on the guns. Britten's trumpets never blare, but their distant calls, combined with the remotely bugle effects of the strings, were even more imperatively menacing.

The GPO, led by Arthur Price, with John Ludlow leading the chamber group, were ever discreet and fully conversant with Britten's individual designs of orchestration, eloquent in their dynamics under the potent baton of Mr. Halsey

John C. Dodds.