

Contrast in style

HAYDN'S Mass in B flat and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* made an exciting contrast in style for religious works at last Saturday's Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra concert.

They demanded completely different tonal quality from the highly professional Guildford Philharmonic Choir, and the singers' performance was a fitting tribute to chorus master and concert conductor, Simon Halsey, on his last appearance with them.

The choir demonstrated its excellent discipline, diction and balance, and the two works gave the opportunity for it also to reveal tonal versatility.

Haydn's Mass uses choir, soloists and orchestra as different voices in the one orchestra, none hugging the limelight, none sinking into mere accompaniment.

The GPO performance was rounded and mellow, punctuated by exciting dynamics for the *Laudamus* and a good rhythmic fugue, bouncing and disciplined.

The soloists blended well, with the exception of soprano Charlotte de Rothschild, who produced a rather obtrusively thin tone, particularly in contrast with alto Gaynor Keeble, whose rather plummy delivery was often lost in the sound of the orchestra.

Tenor Joseph Cornwell's relaxed tone came over surprisingly well against the starker sound of Mark Peterson's bass, but the Mass did not really give any of the soloists a fair chance to shine.

It ended on an optimistic and joyful note for the *Agnus Dei*, giving the slight sensation of a race between choir and orchestra, orchestra in the lead, but the optimism was very different from that bursting from the Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms*.

Here the choir changed its polite, mellow tone for one much more vibrant and raw. Excitement was in the air; even the physical arrangement of instruments on the stage was dramatic. Two pianos, a concert and a baby grand facing each other flanked by rows of brass one side, strings the other.

Delicate woodwind, precise vocal discords and dramatic use of brass make this an important statement of Stravinsky's faith, and the GPO and choir gave an impressive performance.

The two choral works were separated by the delightful *Serenade for Strings*, by Elgar.

This light and delicate piece made an excellent foil, as well as giving scope for the orchestra to show off its subtlety of touch and technical control in the long piano close to the second movement.

Simon Halsey should be well pleased with his send-off.

Jane Garrett.

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