

Review

Awe-inspiring and noble

THE *Grande Messe des Morts* of Hector Berlioz is a massive composition from another world.

It belongs to the 19th-century artistic heritage of a France which revelled in musical rites on a vast scale as an integral part of public life; and it deals with ultimate unknowns such as purgatory and divine judgment.

Combine those factors with the Berlioz characteristics of dramatist and arch-romantic and the inevitable result is a composition which goes beyond our normal musical experience. Harness drive with intelligence, the forces necessary for such a work, and you produce music which is both awe-inspiring and noble.

A performance which reached both these pinnacles was achieved on Saturday in Guildford Cathedral by Brian Wright, who conducted what was overall a most satisfying interpretation of the *Grande Messe*.

This is a work in which the notorious *Tuba mirum* and shattering final bars of the *Lacrymosa* can provide a wall and blaze of sound unsurpassed in any other choral work — and so they did.

But this was also an occasion on which the audience was privileged to hear a performance in which the quieter, gentler and less extravagantly grandiose moments were equally effective.

Indeed, the very silences themselves in the *Angus dei* were every bit as telling as the mightiest of sounds from the huge combined forces in the cathedral.

The forces brought together included Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra — 90-strong on this occasion — with the combined vocal resources of Guildford's Philharmonic Choir and the Goldsmiths' Choral Union.

The choir was particularly outstanding in what is a taxing evening's singing. The text was sung with clarity, projection was excellent, with some fulsome, exciting sounds filling the cathedral nave, and there was an overall rich texture about the whole performance.

All manner of fine moments come to mind: the rich bass sound in the *Kyrie eleison*; lush harmonic layering in the *Dies irae* and the unaccompanied *Quarens me* which included a particularly beautifully spun final line.

There was, temporarily, some flagging in the first part of the *Lacrymosa*, but this was solely in terms of the balance between choir and orchestra. But equilibrium was quickly restored to result in some ringing tones in the *Sanctus* and a lovely, almost hazy, effect in the *Agnus dei*.

Playing at the top of its form was an orchestra which was outstanding both in the moments of thunder — impressive, angry sounds from bass trombone, *et al* — and in the work's latter sections where, for instance, in the *Agnus dei*, the luminous string *arpeggios* were beautiful.

Fine contributions, too, from the big percussion section in playing such an important role in this impressive canvas of sound.

A smaller, but well executed, contribution, too, from tenor William Kendall, whose singing of the *Sanctus* had the necessary qualities of lyricism and ardent feeling in this high-lying music.

Finally, though, one has to return to the conductor, for Wright wove his work of so many contrasts together with such conviction. Anyone can inspire a huge sound from over 300 committed performers; but to produce, as happened on more than one occasion, a massive and equally deafening silence; that is truly the art of making music.

Robert Benjafield.