

# War: the universal message

THERE is a great deal of musical literature on the subject of war. This century alone has spawned such diverse examples of Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, Britten's *War Requiem* and the comparatively rarely-played but nevertheless powerful reflection of the effects of war composed by Arthur Bliss and entitled *Morning Heroes*.

Bliss examines warfare, using literature which spans over 2,500 years; from the *Iliad* to Walt Whitman the common theme is one of bravery by those engaged in war and sadness on the part of those left behind.

The universality of this message came through strongly in a performance of the work given on Saturday by Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Sir Charles Groves.

From the poignancy of a farewell between husband and family, the emotions of a young wife at home and the vivid portrayal of the Somme to the portrayal of Achilles arming himself for combat,

the music is explicit and all the more powerful for being within the context of the various texts, a credible reflection of the words themselves.

The Civic Hall rang with the martial sounds and fierceness of the more aggressive aspects of the composition, the Guildford Phil playing with a great sense of commitment in response to Groves's driving tempo.

That he has equally convincing in the more human movements of the work was also evident, for this was also a sensitive performance, with the elegaic moments — and especially those final few bars with barely a sound to be heard — as effective as the stunningly played climaxes.

Richard Baker was a telling narrator in *Hector's Farewell* and *Spring Offensive*, the latter providing the single most convincing movement of the work. Here, the combination of voice, timpani and bass drum gave a clarity which allowed the textual message to be driven home to greatest effect.

The same clarity was, however, missing from some of the singing by Guildford Philharmonic Choir. It rose magnificently to the challenge of the finale — a sound full of excitement and energy — just as it had, earlier, provided crisp vocal tone in *The City Arming*.

But the more exposed parts of the score when quieter, more refined qualities were heeded found the singing tentative, which led to singing which was totally thin and dynamically monotonous.

There was, however, noth-

ing tentative about the approach of Groves and the orchestra to the *Prelude and Liebestod* from *Tristan and Isolde*, which preceded *Morning Heroes*.

Probably one of the most effective out-of-context orchestral extracts from the operatic world, this is also one of the most difficult to bring off successfully in the comparatively clinical atmosphere of the concert platform.

That it succeeded was due to the way that Groves and the GPO established the atmosphere of the prelude.

The undercurrent of yearning, the doubts of Isolde, the sense of foreboding for the tragedy that lies ahead; all are reflected in the music of all of these, plus the tension that is so vital to the opera as a whole, were contained in this beautifully-paced reading of the music, which was played with great musicality by the orchestra.

Robert Benjafield