

Star quality in opening concerts

THE festival got off to a distinguished start with two events featuring the acclaimed Jamaican bass baritone Willard White.

At the Civic Hall on Saturday White was the soloist in William Walton's oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast*.

With its text from the Bible selected and arranged by Osbert Sitwell, the music is scored for double mixed choir and very large orchestra. The choral forces were provided by the Guildford Chamber Choir and the Guildford Philharmonic Choir and the orchestra was the Guildford Philharmonic under conductor Brian White. The concert was sponsored by BOC.

The lower strings set just the right note of sinister unease to presage the downfall of the King of Babylon.

But unfortunately the choirs seemed unable to com-

municate the emotions of the text; the lament by the waters of Babylon, the writing on the wall and dramatic weighing in the balance, the slaying of Belshazzar and the final mighty hymn of praise mostly came across as a generalised, relentless barrage of sound.

This, augmented by the strident brass and percussion of the orchestra which more than adequately made up in volume what it might have lacked in the numbers Walton had in mind, could be thrilling but one longed for a little subtlety.

Thankfully, this was provided by White, his operatic scale voice easily riding the combined forces of choir and orchestra when necessary and making every word tell.

Particularly memorable was the horror that the souls of men were to be found among the merchandise of Babylon and the almost whispered "slain" as Belshazzar meets his fate.

The evening began with Tchaikovsky's Symphony No 6 in B minor, the *Pathétique*.

Perhaps anticipating the field day they were to be allowed in *Belshazzar*, the horns were too intrusive in the more lyrical, tender movements. The strings soared but without capturing the essential yearning, brooding intensity, especially in the last movement.

The most successful movement was the third where Brian Wright struck the right scurrying introduction and the brass came into its own in the jaunty march.

On Friday evening at the University of Surrey Willard White gave a recital ranging from Schubert and Brahms lieder, through opera to spirituals.

All were a delight to hear from an artist who not only possesses a magnificent voice but considerable dramatic ability. He was ably supported by the distinguished accompanist Malcolm Martineau.

Sheila Smith