

# Cathedral concert captures spirit of timeless Requiem

OF all the musical works which reflect these turbulent times, the *War Requiem* of Benjamin Britten must surely be the most evocative.

Written 30 years ago for the opening of the new Coventry Cathedral, it was intended to mark the spirit of reconciliation between Britain and Germany, hence the use of a British tenor and a German baritone in most performances.

If the images are those of the First World War in which the poet Wilfred Owen fought and died, the impression of timelessness is conveyed by the well-loved words of the requiem Mass, and by the contrast between the robust sounds of a large chorus and the ethereal tones of choirboy trebles.

In the *War Requiem* Britten's brilliant orchestral colours and vivid word painting are at their most inspired, and structural unity is achieved by the skilful reiteration of prominent thematic motifs, some of which are hinted at with considerable subtlety.

Such a work presents a challenge to any group of performers. The Guildford Philharmonic Choir and Or-

chestra's performance in Guildford Cathedral caught the spirit of the work admirably, even if the atmosphere was affected by a few nearby fireworks displays.

The orchestra, led by Hugh Bean, made the most of the exciting and varied sonorities, from the mournful double-dotted dragging motif at the outset, through the glittering brass of the *Domine Jesu*, to the ominous percussive march-like opening to the *Libera Me*.

The chorus sang with commitment and enthusiasm, (notwithstanding some momentary difficulty with the notorious tritone in the first movement), with some wonderful soft tones at the end of the *Dies Irae* and during the poignant *Lacrimosa*, vocal dexterity in the *Quam Olim Abrahae* fugue, and a thrilling sound in the *Hosanna*, even if the voices were drowned in the bars following the shattering climax to the *Libera Me*. They were joined in the Latin text by the soprano Zora Jehlickova whose rich, full voice added a lovely halo to the texture. Out of view, the trebles of the Cathedral

Choir performed with skill and lucidity, cutting effectively through the texture in the closing pages of the *In Paradisum*.

Probably Britten's most original writing was the setting of the poems by Wilfred Owen for tenor, baritone and chamber ensemble. Ian Bostridge's clear unfussy voice was shown to advantage in the moving *Agnus Dei*, while Klaus Hager's description of the great gun was suitably dark-toned. They formed a good duet too, encouraging each other to action near the beginning, and particularly at the great moment of reconciliation towards the end where the two, after death, decide to sleep. Here, in one of the *Requiem's* most moving passages, all the performers are involved.

In early performances of the *War Requiem* there were frequently three conductors liaising with each other by means of mirrors. Last Saturday Neville Creed coordinated all his forces with consummate skill in a performance which received the applause it deserved.

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