

Review

High standard in Verdi Requiem

WHATEVER view we may take of it, or has been taken over the past 110 years — ecclesiastic opera, humanist Mass, or monument to liberation — Verdi's great Requiem still holds its supreme place as his serious masterpiece.

Although liturgical in text but intended for concert performance, it still needs a cathedral to set off its sacred purpose at its best, and its last-

ing popularity was again proved by the enthusiasm of a full audience at Guildford Cathedral, when the Guildford Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra brought it there last Saturday.

It was conducted by Brian Wright, one of our younger masters of the larger choral repertory and until very recently conductor of the BBC Symphony Chorus. The fine Guildford choir, singing at their well-balanced best, was supported by a contingent from the Goldsmiths Choral Union, of which Mr. Wright is also director.

Operatic it may be in texture, but only Verdi could have written such telling, heart-warming melodies as the *Recordare* and the *Lacrymosa* in such a context.

And, as usual, the intense drama of the Mass was enhanced by the thunder and lightning of the tremendous *Dies Irae* — a mixture of tumultuous swirling themes, shattering chords and frightened whispers which, strangely, battered the cathedral's notorious acoustic into terrified acceptance.

Let me deal with the orchestra next. Mr. Wright sensibly

kept their massive potentiality in proper perspective for most of the evening, bringing out certain facets of orchestration not always clearly audible, especially from the woodwind. He also refused to allow the fanciful Verdian intricacies of such accompaniments as those for the *Lux Aeterna* or the light relaxation of the *Sanctus* to degenerate into vulgar verbosity. And there was, happily, little sentimental rubato.

I have seldom heard the separated trumpet calls of the *Tuba Mirum* played to such commanding effect, both on and off "stage."

The four soloists worthily upheld the generally high standard. It was good to welcome back the tenor, Rowland Sidwell, who was for 10 years or more a lay clerk in the cathedral choir before his recent "discovery" as a principal with the English National Opera, and is now singing leading roles at the Coliseum and at Glyndebourne.

It is obvious that his fine well-modulated voice has benefited from his new dedication. The newly clear tenderness of his *sotto voce* high notes was most amply evinced in the remote, almost supernatural

entry of *Hostias*, but the whole of the *Ingomescio* aria was beautifully expressive.

Both the young female soloists sang with conviction and eloquence, belying an early touch of fragility, of which there was another hint in the strangely haunting octaves of *Agnus Dei*. But Jean Rigby's *Liber Scriptus* was fluent and sensuous, while the Welsh soprano, Julie Kennard, revealed remarkable breath control in the lovely *Offertorio* and reached her soaring B flat in the *Libera me* accurately and with no effort — one of the most testing points in all music for sopranos.

Michael George kept Verdi's exacting bass arias and ensembles in firm basic control, his dark dramatic voice admirably suited to the impetus of *Tuba Mirum* and the menace of *Confutatis maledictus*.

Kenneth Lank, chorus master and trainer of the Philharmonic Choir, deservedly shared in the final ovation from the packed cathedral.

John C. Dodds