

Well-earned applause for superb music

TWENTY-ONE years as Guildford's director of music forged a deep and lasting bond between conductor Vernon Handley, his orchestra and the concert-going public.

But though loyalty and affection were much in evidence at Saturday's concert by the Guildford* Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir, Guildford Chamber Choir and Cathedral Choristers, the drumming heels and rapturous applause were not the result of a wave of nostalgia, but the well-merited response to a super evening's music making.

The programme suited Handley perfectly: Delius's *Brigg Fair* followed by Ravel's *Concerto in D for Piano (Left Hand)* and Orchestra and ending with Vaughan Williams' *Sancta Civitas*.

He gave subtle shape to the Delius, creating an evocative, misty atmosphere rising to explosive and well-balanced crescendos with the brass nicely under control. Rhythms gave a feeling of contained energy and the strings were alert. The ending was a beautifully sustained whisper.

The Ravel is a glorious opportunity for a pianist to demonstrate left handed virtuosity with the right hand firmly clamped to the knee.

Originally composed for a pianist who had lost his right arm during the First World War, the work exploits the piano's capacity for a sustained bass superimposed with gymnastics in the upper octaves.

Joanna MacGregor's energetic left hand was master of the entire keyboard for an impressive and dramatic per-

formance.

The work came to a well-coordinated abrupt halt that spoke of Handley's control.

Vaughan Williams' *Sancta Civitas* is a lovely work which melds the different voices of orchestra, choir, soloists and treble choristers together into an artistic whole.

The diction of the choir was extremely poor to start with, but it improved noticeably in the piano passages.

Soloists Mervyn Collins and Brian Rayner Cook brought out the spirituality of the work, but the choristers, hidden and muffled in a back room, were a little disappointing.

This was a very musical and atmospheric performance.

Jane Garrett