

Brilliant Russian music

A GLITTERING programme of Russian music was the Guildford Philharmonic's first contribution to the Guildford International Music Festival, and it was appropriate that its principal conductor, En Shao, should take the baton on this occasion.

Rachmaninov's choral symphony *The Bells* is essentially that, a choral symphony. The orchestration is dazzling, and even in the uncertain acoustic of Guildford Cathedral every detail in the score came over clearly. This was evident from the outset: The scintillating, neatly pointed interjections describing the silver sleigh bells.

There was something intensely sensual about the movement describing the wedding, and the scherzo, depicting the alarm bells, was suitably terrifying as it rose and fell in mood, driven on by violent, insistent rhythms. Perhaps the most intense music is reserved for the finale, depicting the funeral bells sounding on and on at a doleful pace, relieved by a most beautiful cor anglais solo.

The chorus sang skilfully and accurately with a wonderful sense of dramatic contrast, even if many of their words were lost in the acoustic. Soprano Elena Voznesenskaya gave a beautiful but not too heavy tone to the wedding movement, tenor Rowland Sidwell sang enthusiastically in the opening movement, and bass Anatoli Safiulin's rendering of the finale caught the despairing mood of Poe's poem admirably.

Rimsky-Korsakov's suite from *The Golden Cockerel* is just as colourfully orchestrated, and if anything, more original harmonically than *The Bells*. En Shao and the philharmonic made the most of their opportunities: The mysterious oriental themes, the mocking trumpet call of the cockerel, and the sudden off-key, denouement, all came over brilliantly.

It was a refreshing change to hear a performance of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* which was not drowned out by special effects. In fact, this performance was striking in having a significant part for chorus, who sang the orthodox hymn at the beginning and the Russian anthem at the end.

The concert was sponsored by Borax Europe.

Shelagh Godwin