

Glory in silver lining

ACCORDING to the proverb, every cloud has a silver lining – the closure of Guildford's civic hall has benefited the cathedral, which has seen an explosion of musical activity in the interim.

It hosted two major events at the weekend, starting on Friday night with the Guildford Philharmonic's *Russian Romantics* concert.

The cathedral's cavernous interior generally suits choral and lighter music. But the Philharmonic has rightly decided that Guildford concertgoers should not have to survive on a limited diet for five seasons.

Carefully chosen large-scale works have been programmed and although the quick-changing harmonies of Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila Overture* were muddy, con-

ductor Edward Gardner extracted great energy.

This led strongly into Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No1 in F sharp minor*, where the orchestra gave a beautiful accompanying performance to soloist Jorge Luis Prats, whose virtuosity and technical faculty was completely staggering.

The concerto is frighteningly difficult but he seemed to glide over it with a minimum of movement – nothing added or taken away. Scintillating, exhilarating and passionate; adjectives comprehensively fail this performance.

Tchaikovsky's brooding *Symphony No5 in E minor* was a great choice and a great way of providing a substantial work in reverberant acoustics.

Edward Gardner is an exceptional conductor and, although the Philharmonic is usually a very good orchestra, he extracted from it an extra emotional edge.

This energy was urgent, foreboding and ecstatic as necessary and brought into sharp focus Tchaikovsky's theme of providence working itself through the individual movements.

It also genuinely encapsulated the idea of Russian Romance – a fine way to end another great concert.

■ ON Saturday, Sir Edward Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* was performed by the Guildford Philharmonic Choir and the Forest Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Jeremy Backhouse.

From the start the Forest

Philharmonic was in control. Made up of London's best amateurs and rising-star music students, this "community orchestra" was the best non-professional group I have heard.

Elgar's scoring is highly effective but the effects often come at the expense of flowing individual part writing. The orchestra provided exactly what Elgar intended – an ethereal sound with a gentle stream of movement punctuated by dramatic, even violent, passages.

It is never easy for a large chorus to sing with an orchestra and stay in time but this was not a problem for the choir. Members clearly relished the *Praise to the Holiest* and devil's choruses and the many plainchant and imitative passages.

As Gerontius, Eugene Ginty made a slow start but was fully warmed up by the *Sanctus, fortis*, singing the second half particularly well with a befitting resolve and passion.

Michael Bundy, as the Priest and the Angel of the Agony filled the cathedral with his rich tone and projected superbly, providing among other things an impetus before the extraordinary "sight of God" moment.

Elgar placed a huge emotional investment in this work – there are so many highlights, so many beautiful melodies, soulful moments and personal references.

This performance was a strong interpretation worthy of the music and a unique spiritual experience.

Simon Ashall



Guildford Cathedral plays host to *The Dream of Gerontius*.