

**Hilary Trigg**

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## GUILDFORD PHILHARMONIC CHOIR/FOREST PHILHARMONIC

The Guildford Philharmonic's concert in the cathedral on Saturday May 22nd, entitled "A Russian Spectacular" was well named. We were indeed treated to a most spectacular evening from all points of view.

Jeremy Backhouse, the choir's dynamic musical director since 1995, is to be congratulated for his continuous bold, imaginative programme planning. In less than a year the choir have promoted the most stimulating repertoire, including the colossal 8th Symphony of Mahler, and performed it to an amazingly high standard. This is due in no small part to Mr Backhouse's enthusiasm, efficiency and, let it be added bravely in tackling some of the largest works ever conceived.

The concert opened with a vigorous rendition of the Polovstian Dances from Prince Igor by the Nationalist composer, Borodin. The choir's accompanist, Jeremy Filsell, then gave a glorious performance of the formidably difficult 3rd Piano Concerto of Rachmaninov. This was music making of the highest order. We have come to take Mr Filsell's virtuosity almost for granted but this technical prowess was united with playing of superb musicality and architecture. The beautifully textured lyrical passages were delivered with a warmth and euphoria which was profoundly moving. In this he was aided and abetted by his namesake conductor who drew the most ravishing sounds from the excellent Forest Philharmonic Orchestra-ensemble, very difficult to achieve in this work, was well nigh perfect. The musical partnership between conductor and soloist could be compared without exaggeration to the classic recording by Ashkenazy and Previn. The last pages brought the concerto to a climax of electrifying exhilaration.

The second part of the programme was devoted to Prokofiev's cantata drawn from his film score to the legendary Eisenstein's 'Alexander Nevsky'. The choir sang this music with total conviction and an appropriately stark sense of style. The decision to sing the work in Russian paid immense dividends. Choir and orchestra alike seemed to overcome the cathedral's acoustical problems with easy mastery-Prokofiev's bitter bitonal harmonies shook the cathedral to its

very foundations in the thrilling fortissimo passages but there was poetry as well, particularly in Theresa Shaw's noble rendition of the penultimate movement.

The Guildford Philharmonic is going through a most distinguished chapter in its history. One can hardly wait for the next event-Elgar's perennially popular 'Dream of Gerontius'.

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