

Memory of a season

1974-5 season

REVIEWING the recent season by the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra, my main memory is of a standard still higher than previous years.

In this 13th annual series under Vernon Handley, the G.P.O. emerged excitingly as comparable to any of our national orchestras. In fact, their account of the Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4 in F minor surpassed that by the London Philharmonic also under Handley a week or two earlier. The crescendos were triggered with quaking, precise power — and it ended with a coda of memorable totality.

Apart from this, another Russian symphony remains as probably the most wholly successful orchestral offering. It was the Prokofiev Symphony No. 6 in E flat minor, which took us by surprise both by its profundity and the standard of playing inspired. The rest of that concert was equally unforgettable, including Kabalevsky's Cello Concerto in A minor.

My own view of the finest complete concert was one not actually in Guildford. The G.P.O. made a musical pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral in November and repeated two British works heard the week before in the Civic Hall.

The Philharmonic Choir sang Holst's Ode to Death and Sir Arthur Bliss was present to hear his Meditations on a Theme of John Blow, played with timeless eloquence. The G.P.O. navigated all its eddying vortices and cross-currents.

The programme opened with the strange and strong resonances of Tchaikovsky's Hamlet overture. The inexorable urgency of its tragedy reverberated in the passionate portrayal of this score.

One of the most moving evenings of the season was heard quite recently when Handley collapsed and John Forster took over only a few hours before the concert. The G.P.O. and Choir strove to their very limits with results of which Handley himself would have been proud. After a meticulous Mozart Symphony No. 40 in G minor, they played and sang out their hearts in the Beethoven Choral.

It was a combination of the uplifting symphony, the thought of Handley's illness, and the feeling for Mr. Forster which created a memorable musical atmosphere. For after all, this season has reminded us forcibly that music is for heart as well as head. When the two facets fuse, we may glimpse the eternal — as lovers too must know.

Bax is a British composer combining both these intrinsic ingredients, elements. His music paints visual sound in abstract eternal terms. Like all art, and like life itself, it cannot be fully appreciated by any short cuts in either trouble or time.

The Bax Symphony No. 3 was played during December. Like the Fourth Symphony recorded by the G.P.O. a decade ago it is uncompromising yet ultimately rewarding, its meandering mystique building up a cumulative response. The Nielsen Flute Concerto was a briefly brilliant eruption in this same concert.

Talking of British composers, the final concert included a first performance of Basse Danse by John McCabe. This engrossing contemporary medieval piece was orchestrated for everything from the call of a lone piccolo to outcries of fierce, fragmented brass. After and obliquely syncopated shafts of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G major, the season ended with another British work, Appalachia by Delius. Like a large-scale, low-key epilogue to the emotions of the previous eight months' music.

The season had started on an acoustically spectacular note with the Beethoven Emperor Concerto and then Tchaikovsky's Theme and Variations from Suite No. 3 in G. Highly-charged music — powerful if not profound. That afternoon opened with the aural panoply of Rossini's Thieving Magpie.

This was certainly an eventful season. Recently there was the stage-lights failure in the final concert. During October the audience heard the sirens supplementing music in the evening of the Guildford pub bombs. Perhaps aptly, these were heard behind two British composers, Delius and Malcolm Arnold.

Three weeks later we had a nostalgic yet fresh sound of the Grieg Piano Concerto in A minor. Instead of a Sibelius

symphony, Handley played two of the composer's tone poems. Each engrossing individually, but perhaps when paired they were a bit too repetitive.

The least thrilling concert was in January. The Fauré suite Pelleas and Melisande turned out to be a reticent miniature. The Violin Concerto No. 4 in 4 major by Mozart was also on the modestly intimate side. So it was left to the Brahms Fourth Symphony to bring a blaze into the wintry afternoon, when the G.P.O. started to unravel its jagged jigsaw of son et lumière.

One or two mishaps marred this splendid season. One must mention the acoustic problems encountered in the Guildford Cathedral when the G.P.O. and Philharmonic Choir gave us the Britten War Requiem. For some reason, the Canterbury Cathedral concert sounded so much more embracing, less remote than this one. A casualty not connected with players or performance.

This was the season that Mahler came to Guildford! Handley and the G.P.O. brought us a potent performance of his Symphony No. 5 in C sharp minor. A solid hour that gradually engulfed us in its hypnotic flow. The Beethoven Triple Concerto had preceded it — quite an hors d'oeuvre!

For the most memorable, if not necessarily the most moving performance, I must return to where I began: that remarkable reading of the Tchaikovsky Fourth Symphony.

— J. F. T.