

Innovative orchestra aims to convince doubters

IF the proof of the pudding is in the eating, Guildford Philharmonic is dishing up a successful menu.

The orchestra has just launched the brochure for its new season of concerts starting on October 10, a mix of large and small works in large and small venues, offering a wonderful selection of styles and genres from opera to dance, percussion, medieval jam session, Viennese waltz and blockbuster choral works.

It follows the shape of last year's ground-breaking season which saw not only record-breaking 92% box office sales, but also the orchestra's most successful Guildford concert, with an audience of 3,600 in Stoke Park.

But the almost total disappearance of the old GPO format of overture, concerto, interval, major symphony, has inspired outrage among some of the orchestra's former friends.

Their letters to the *Surrey Advertiser* this week mourn the passing of this traditional diet and pass somewhat snide comment on the choice of such a populist pot boiler as the Dvorak *New World Symphony* as the symphony of the whole season.

Orchestra manager Nicola Goold relishes the opportunity to explain just why she has changed that menu.

She was faced with budget cuts, as Guildford Borough Council was keen to reduce its funding, but that was only one factor. Far more important for the survival of the orchestra was the survival of its audience, and despite the loyalty to the old ways portrayed in the letters, the pathetic ticket sales and the ever-rising age of the audience argued terminal decline.

This was not a problem confined to Guildford. It is universal in Britain, and

orchestras throughout the country are having to devise ways of enticing completely new punters to their concerts.

And Nicola is confident that she is bucking the trend. The age of concert-goers is coming down in leaps and bounds, people never before seen at GPO events are buying tickets, and council fears that the orchestra was becoming an expensive and elitist drain on public funds have been stemmed. This has to be good news for the GPO's future.

After all, no-one is criticising the professional quality of the recent concerts (the standard was actually very high), just the scale and choice of repertoire.

Nicola argues that bringing new people to concerts means that they are listening to works very often for the first time and an introduction to the *New World Symphony*, Handel's *Messiah* (repeated by popular request from last year) and the Bach *B. Minor Mass* should be a marvellous experience.

Slimming down the huge orchestra for chamber works is not the end of the world either, provided the potential is there to bring everyone together for the big moments, and a look at the season shows that far from being uniformly disappointing, it is a good mix of trusted favourites and exciting innovation.

Bach and Vivaldi by Candlelight in Holy Trinity Church, Guildford, Carl Orff's dramatic *Carmina Burana* at the Civic, music from opera and dance, and guest appearances by internationally famous ensembles balance the need to please, to fill seats and to inspire.

For it is absolutely useless to put on concerts of worthy music that "ought to be performed" if



Orchestral innovator: Nicola Goold, manager of the Guildford Philharmonic. (c)

nobody wants to listen to them.

And the inclusion of "outsiders" in the GPO season does not necessarily detract from the pivotal role of the borough orchestra. It enhances it by dint of the sheer quality of the guests. The Tallis Scholars rarely perform outside London, but they were so impressed with the Holy Trinity audience and acoustic last year they actually asked to come back.

Ensemble Bash is the UK's leading percussion group and its programme

includes West African drumming. Well known medievalists the Dufay Collective will be bringing music to the newly-restored Wanborough Barn that was composed at the time the barn was built in 1388.

Conductor Vernon Handley developed the orchestra in the 1970s into experts in the English school. This was brilliant for the time. But now it is time to do something different.

Jane Garrett