

ORCHESTRA AND CHOIR GAVE OF THEIR BEST

It is not impossible to guess at the reason for the neglect of "The Apostles," the first oratorio of the trilogy intended by Elgar to interpret musically the New Testament story.

Could it not be that it requires too concentrated an involvement by its audience? Though as reflective in parts as its greater predecessor "The Dream of Gerontius," it depends largely on its narrative character in which the six soloists interweave closely with the chorus and orchestra. Sometimes, as in the mystic passages of the finale it is Elgar at his most exalted, but there are no definitive arias and few full choruses.

However, Vernon Handley's effort at a revival — preceded four years ago with "The Kingdom" — was certainly well supported by Guildford listeners at the Civic Hall on Saturday and, in a performance demanding massive forces, the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir gave it their considerable best.

In many ways the work must be more rewarding to sing than to hear for the first time. In departing from the classical oratorio form of the pedantic Victorian era Elgar had already set a pattern of deeply religious musical emotion which presents a stern challenge to any choir.

The six soloists, in general, matched their voices well in combined and separate balance to the meditative meaning of the oratorio. Jane Manning produced soprano notes of high quality and purity and, though apparently never at full power her delivery was always clear and distinct — redolent with sympathy and maternal wonder in the music of the Virgin Mary. In the role of Judas — the most provocative of them all — Christopher Keyte expressed guilt-ridden remorse with Elgarian intensity in his extended Scriptural solo which is the nearest attempt at an aria in the whole work. With him in some complicated colloquies were John Wakefield (St. John) and Robert Bickerstaff (St. Peter), the latter producing some robust and ringing phrases as befitted the character.

In the narrative part of Jesus, Bryan Drake sang throughout in a steady, smooth baritone which was correctly penetrating rather than powerful. Sarah Walker stood in at short notice for Margaret Cable in the alto role of Mary Magdalene and dealt capably with the anxiety and tensivity of her main solo, though at times later she was inevitably swamped by orchestral sound.

The philharmonic orchestra, led by John Ludlow, was conducted with his usual direct steadiness by Mr. Handley, who dealt competently with the complicated entries and exits of the chorus — and produced the few moments of high drama (including the call of the Hebrew "shofar") from full-toned brass and exact percussion. — J.C.D.