

RSPB concert under baton of Vernon Handley

I TRAVELLED a total of some 200 miles to hear Vernon Handley conducting the Guildford Philharmonic at the Civic Hall, Guildford, on Sunday. The journey proved infinitely worth while, as I knew it would.

The cornerstone of the concert was the mystery-laden multi-layered Symphony No. 5 in D by Vaughan Williams. Dedicated to Sibelius, and at times reminiscent of him, this visionary work also represented a journey — musical summary of the composer's profoundest thoughts of life to 1943.

Handley's LP of this work won the 1988 British Record Industry Award for classical music. So the GPO was on it, mettle to play equally as well!

Both conductor and orchestra were on award-winning form right from the prelude, with its precisely stirring runs, veiled brass dissonances and overall buoyant benediction.

Handley started to wind up the tension through springy woodwind in the scurrying scherzo. Then the emotional romanza movement unfolded Sibelius-like from a cor anglais almost out of *The Swan of Tuonela*.

The sustained tension, developed in a shimmering/shivering chordal sequence, spilled over to the final *pas-sacaglia* — building to brass blocks against cascading strings. Perky interjections

from the splendid flute of Ileana Ruheman led us to the hushed quest-of-the-spirit moments of the final pages. A consummate performance.

The concert was a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and in the interval the RSPB made a presentation to the conductor in recognition of his work on its behalf. Hardly has a long interest in ornithology and a display of beautiful bird photos by Catherine and Vernon Handley was on show at the hall.

The first half of the programme was devoted to the theme of birds — opening with Respighi's suite, *The Birds*, Classical squawks, stately doves, pecking hens, fluted nightingale trills and cuckoo calls were all tossed off with appropriate airiness.

On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring is Delius at his essentially English and most mistily evocative. But the performance sensibly did not sound too distant or so muted as to be muffled.

If the Delius conjures dewy spring spiderwebs, *The Lark Ascending*, by Vaughan Williams, must mean azure summery air. The 24-year-old violinist Tasmin Little played the solo Line with a luminous assurance beyond her age — especially on the notorious and string.

But despite all the bird-song, it was the symphony that lingered on the emotions and the mind.

John Frayn Turner.