

# THE SINFONIA OF LEEDS

by Elisabeth Smith

TIME WAS when the musical cogniscenti used to dread the sound of an amateur orchestra—but times, at least in Yorkshire, have changed. Commenting on one of their concerts, Ernest Bradbury, a critic not given to over-praise, described the Sinfonia of Leeds as, 'A surprising bonus and a great asset to the musical reputation of the region'.

The orchestra was born from the ambition of Graham Bennett, owner of the Classical Record Shop in Leeds, to form an amateur orchestra with professional standards. Having studied harmony until the late 1960s with Dr. Percy Saunders, the organist and choirmaster at Wakefield Cathedral and being a pianist and organist himself, Graham, like many instrumentalists, was a frustrated conductor. Passionately dedicated to high standards in music, he has found previous associations with amateur orchestras unsatisfactory. Hence the decision to try to form his own ensemble. An advertisement in *The Yorkshire Arts* magazine in September, 1972 produced enthusiastic replies from students, amateur musicians and peripatetic teachers. Auditions were held and the first concert was given in January 1973 in the City of Leeds and Carnegie College. Its programme included Haydn's Symphony No. 74 and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2, whose soloist was the young Leeds pianist Laurence Cantor, who had just left Leeds College of Music to study with the late Cyril Smith at the Royal College.

The Sinfonia numbers thirty-five musicians and performs the standard baroque and classical repertoire, with occasional excursions into nineteenth and twentieth century works for the smaller orchestra. So far, halls have echoed to the sounds of the Schubert Fifth Symphony, Haydn's Seventy-fourth, Eighty-third and Ninety-second, Mozart's *Paris* and *Prague* Symphonies, Beethoven's symphonies numbers One and Two and concerti by Vivaldi, Mozart, Beethoven—and the young Leeds composer, Ian Milnes.

Concerts are often performed with resident soloists like that of the Mozart Horn Concerto with their first horn, Laurence Tucker and a Vivaldi Flute Concerto with the then first flute, Michael Copley, now grazing in Cambridge musical pastures.

There have been three leaders in the orchestra's history. The first was Dr. David Salinger, lecturer in mathematics at Leeds University, who is still a playing member but who stepped aside to allow others a chance. Next came Robin Gilbert, the Headmaster of Easingwold School, who used to make an eighty-mile round trip for the joy of music-making. The new occupant of the leader's desk is Wendy Salinger, a brilliant violinist who teaches at North Farm Middle School in Leeds. Her vivid personality inspired the orchestra to splendid



Graham Bennett

Spectrum Photography, Wyke



playing while accompanying the Huddersfield Choral Society in Haydn's *Creation* at St. Bartholomew's Church in Armley. This concert, given in aid of the restoration of the magnificent Schulze organ in the church, was the first occasion upon which the Sinfonia was not conducted by Graham Bennett. Douglas Robinson took over his baton, and this former chorus master for twenty-eight years of Covent Garden Opera and now chorus master of the Huddersfield Choral Society, was lavish in his praise of their playing.

A significant milestone in the orchestra's life was reached in December, when James Brown, the composer and distinguished member of the Leeds University Music Department, entrusted to it the northern premier of his *Serenade for Orchestra*. Commissioned by the Havant and District Orchestral Society of Hampshire, this work received its first performance in 1969. It is greatly hoped that it will be followed in 1975 by the first performance of a work written specially for the orchestra by Brian Newbould.

And what of the future? As with all artistic ventures, money is always a problem. As public support for the concerts grows it is hoped that

the orchestra will be able to go from strength to strength.

There is never a shortage of players wanting to join the Leeds Sinfonia, but Graham Bennett is always pleased to hear from musicians who have the same enthusiasm and love of music.

