



Gloriæ Dei Cantores and Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil*: A Faith-full Performance

By Ronald E. Grames



Rachmaninoff: All-Night Vigil
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GLORIÆ DEI CANTORES

Collectors of choral recordings will likely know the name Gloriæ Dei Cantores—Singers to the Glory of God—but may not, as I did not, know much about it beyond the quality of its releases over the years.

Gloriæ Dei Cantores is the resident choir of the Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod Bay, the church of the Community of Jesus, a Benedictine monastic community. If this raises the image of monks and nuns chanting, that is not inaccurate, as there are many names in the choir roster preceded with the title Sr. or Br. And, the choir is particularly known for its fine recordings of Gregorian service music and offers instruction in the singing of liturgical chant. There are, however, many others listed without such honorifics, and the repertoire of this choir is much broader than just Medieval offices, extending in repertoire even into the secular and in time to the present.

The most recent recording by the choir is of Rachmaninoff's 1915 a cappella masterpiece, the *All-Night Vigil, op. 37*. Its release provided me with the opportunity to meet, by email conversation, the director of the choir, Richard K. Pugsley. In this recording he serves as producer and sings in the bass section, for reasons that will become clear. I also met Sister Genevieve Cleverly, the label and marketing manager at Paraclete Press, the community's publishing enterprise.

Before we start talking about the recording at hand, could you tell me about the Gloriæ Dei Cantores and your work with the ensemble? You are only the second director of the choir in its 29-year history, and I gather you performed with the chorus before beginning to assume conductorial duties. How did this come about, what do you find special about the chorus, and how has so much been accomplished in the relatively few years that the chorus has been in existence?

The Community of Jesus was initially formed during the evangelical movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. I was exposed to and a part of this evolution since a very young boy, age four. There are many ways in which this community is unique, in that it is rooted in the monastic Benedictine tradition, yet its members are brothers, sisters, and both single and married lay people and families.

As members wrestled with the call they felt on their lives, worship was one of the foundation blocks. Music, especially choral music, has its foundations in the monastic chanting of the offices, which the community still carries out daily. The need to bring the incredible shared history of sacred music, as expressed through rich history of our forefathers/mothers, needed to continue to be brought to our minds and enrich the services. Therefore the choir's mission became to sing the sacred Christian music that the Holy Spirit had inspired through the many centuries and countries.

Composers throughout history have had differing ways of understanding and expressing the biblical texts, prayers, and reflections on their paths through their life journeys. These expressions were not only unique outlooks and understanding of what is meant by the texts or how the texts spoke to them in their historic time of need, but also unique ways of musical expression through harmony, structure, rhythm, etc.

An obvious example I am sure we're all familiar with is Arnold Schoenberg's Psalm 130, *Out of the depths has my soul cried out to thee*. This is not the same setting as the English chanted psalm for Evensong, or the Charpentier, or the Arvo Pärt, or the Requiem of Mozart. There's such an incredible variety of expressions, each one true to its composer and people. And each can be true and meet the needs of our hearts' and souls' expressions today. With that as a foundation, how can one not be drawn in to engaging in the process of expressing these works that not only meet our hearts and souls, but offer more than one can hope in a lifetime to express and experience?

So, when I returned from my stint in the U.S. Air Force, I auditioned and became a member of the bass-baritone section. As time moved forward, I took time to study, graduating from Oberlin Conservatory. When I returned, I was asked to sit in on producing *Gloriæ Dei*'s recordings. This I had the privilege of doing alongside Dr. Craig Timberlake, as I developed my listening to a greater degree. This evolved into assisting during rehearsals, and then when Elizabeth Patterson, the first conductor of *Gloriæ Dei Cantores*, retired, it fell to me to attempt to carry forward her work and vision.

This work and vision of preserving the rich musical heritage we have, and the desire to preserve it, was Elizabeth's. This drive to record as much music as possible from different periods and to thereby preserve it: that was the catalyst behind the large and varied discography. From Palestrina to Rubbra, from *Music of the Americas* to *Sacred Songs of Russia*, all had to have as authentic a sound as possible. This often ended up in classes and seminars while we were on international tours: a week of lectures on Palestrina while in Venice, or work with a Greek Orthodox Chant master while in Crete, or help from Peter, Irina and Vladimir Minin for the Russian music. And there was study with the composers themselves, such as Samuel Adler, Petr Eben, or Mark O'Connor.

Specifically in regards to our experience with the Russian music, it was under Elizabeth Patterson's direction that *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* went to Russia. As a young person, she had been on a mission to Spain and Portugal, and had experienced how important it was to bring not only a bit of the U.S. to other countries, but more importantly to share in some of their history. So, for every country we had the privilege of touring, we brought some of their music also. Russia was no different, and our contact with the churches in Russia insisted that if *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* was to come over, that we had to agree to three trips. He said that was what was required for us to see the true face of the Russian people—quite the privilege!

Is singing with *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* a full-time vocational calling, then, or do members have other significant responsibilities to the community, as well? Do all of the lay members in the choir live in

the monastic community, or do some belong to the choir but not the community itself? I see that the choir is described as “amateur” in some references, but what I see of the activities of the ensemble suggests a substantial commitment by the members.

Being a member of *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* is not a full-time vocation, as you describe, but it is a *primary* commitment. Some members have other responsibilities within the community—for instance brothers and sisters—while many—I would even say most—have outside full-time employment. Those who audition know that *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* takes precedence, and that they need to be aware they will have to let their employers know and work out their schedules with that in mind.

Rehearsals are 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. every weekday, so the time commitment gets established very early on in the process. In addition, there are the occasional “tech weeks” where rehearsals are 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and often include evenings, so that means three to six hours a day of work. Although the group sometimes gets tagged as “amateur,” that is strictly from the American perspective of members not being paid. The demands and requirements very much adhere to the European model and understanding of “professional,” and the results seem to reveal that, I think. So, is it a full-time vocational calling? Some would say yes.

As for the membership make-up: At the moment, all the members are also vowed members of the Community of Jesus. However, it was not always so. Seven of our youngest members took their first vows only this January, so for the four or so years prior they were not members of the community, and many were juniors and seniors in high school. Many asked to be homeschooled so that they could fit the choir’s schedule into their academic requirements; it is quite a commitment on their part to participate.

There is also a lot of instruction about individual vocal development, knowledge for which they become responsible. That applies to all members. In addition, they must complete the eight books of theory from the Royal School of Church Music and several aural skills evaluations. So, again, I would say the commitment is substantial and the demands are very professional.

Gloriæ Dei Cantores certainly has a large repertoire, from the chant that is learned, I presume, for the daily offices you sing, to an impressive array of music in many different styles. Russian music—indeed Orthodox Christian music in particular—seems to present more than a usual challenge to a choir which has focused primarily on the Western repertoire. How did the choir come to embrace this Russian tradition?

Great question. My first response will be vocal in nature. Russian music, due to its bass pyramidal balance, tends to cause vocalists to drop the center of their vocal tone too far back into their acoustical space. This creates a manipulated sound and a swallowed quality that removes the clarity of each person’s unique and natural quality: each person’s vocal print.

The Italian school, upon which we base our vocal technique program, is driven in part by finding the most natural and evenly balanced sound between the light and dark—*chiaroscuro*—qualities of each person’s voice: if you will allow, the center of their natural sound.

As *Gloriæ Dei* works back and forth with the colors of singers’ individual voices, a game I have them play to assist is to find the two extremes of where their voices can go between the two shades of light and dark without introducing tension into the natural sound. Upon finding those extremes, they try speaking with each other as they shift the sound back and forth. It is a very weird sounding conversation, but it allows them to have more awareness of the shades within their individual vocal toolchest or

palette. They then assign a number one to 10 for those colors, one being brightest and 10 being darkest, and then begin to sing the Russian music, vowels only to start with, within the space of the five to seven window. Eight to 10 tends to be too far back in the nasopharyngeal space. This process allowed for the artists to find, choose, and then bring the depth of the Russian ideal to their natural sound, without putting their Italianate production into jeopardy.

One exercise that Elizabeth had us do, particularly for the women in the choir, was to take #10 size tomato soup cans—the large industrial cans—still with their product inside, and sing their line while holding them out to their sides. This helped each of us to lean into our abdominal support more deeply, which also helped connect with the depth of the tone required to authentically produce the Russian aura. You can imagine the challenge then, for each Saturday and Sunday service, to return to our fundamental Italianate sound—quite an adventure!

I must add, however, that after the first tour, having lived amongst the Russian people and, from our Western standards, having suffered and been exposed to just a little bit of how they lived daily, our understanding of the earnestness of the depth of the prayers sank in to an even greater level. This greatly expanded our understanding and our ability to connect with their history and literature.

I have read that the tours were at the behest of Metropolitan Alexy of Leningrad, who became Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia about the time of your first tour, and that you were actually singing some sacred repertoire in Russian—really, Soviet in the first tour—churches not heard there since the Revolution. You have released several CDs of Russian music, beginning in 1998. Is this the repertoire you sang there?

Yes, the tours were with the blessing and encouragement of Metropolitan Alexy. He even invited us to the Holy Saturday All-Night Vigil service in Moscow at the completion of the Yelokhovo Cathedral in 1992. What an incredible experience that was. The deacon he had assigned to go with him to the various services had a voice to die for: amazing range, clarity, and strength, with no amplification needed. It was truly a voice founded on suffering and perseverance.

What you hear on the Russian CDs that Gloriæ Dei has put out through Paraclete Press are the songs and pieces that we took to Russia: initially the USSR. In addition, we took a set of hand bells and played pieces on them in between vocal sets. That allowed the choir to have vocal rest to sustain such heavy programs. In addition, a great deal of exercise was executed by members going. We met every morning, for a bit over an hour, for strength training and cardio, in order to be ready for the rigors of the travel, concert schedule, and musical demands.

It was an amazing opportunity to sing these sacred treasures not only in the churches that had suffered so much, but also in the concert halls. In some cases, these pieces were sung there for the first time. Imagine an American choir singing in Russian to the Russians their own sacred music not heard in those halls. Many audience members assumed we were fluent Russian speakers as they greeted us in the hallways afterward, speaking away in Russian while we stared blankly back. It was quite a comical scene as it dawned on them that we spoke very little Russian, or some not at all: *spaseeba* (thank you) at best!

In addition to the sacred Russian music, we also sang some more traditional American music which allowed for a concert exchange of both nations, uniting us in the common language of music. Russians and Americans are amazingly similar, boisterous and full of bravado. “See here, biggest bell in world,” etc.—not too unlike us. So the people get along fine with the people. It always seems to be the

governments that are the source of the divisions—at least, that seemed to be our experience. Regardless, if it was metropolitan Moscow or the backwoods wooden shacks and mud huts in the far provinces of Siberia—Yakutsk was the farthest east we went, on the second tour—we all got along swimmingly. Amazing.

Your answer brings up the sad history of Russian liturgical music in the last century. Rachmaninoff wrote the All-Night Vigil in 1915. It was never intended for worship. He had learned his lesson regarding the incompatibilities of his creative impulses with the Orthodox Church's careful preservation of their traditions when his Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom was admired but rejected for use in the church. As I understand it, he didn't even try to comply with enforced forms and modes, though he used traditional hymns extensively as thematic material. The All-Night Vigil was soon banned by the Bolsheviks, and wasn't even recorded until 1965. That recording was for export and not available domestically, as the music was still officially banned. Recordings were allowed by Russian academic choirs during the 1980s, but a large part of that tradition was lost to the average Russian music lover, even if it was maintained, at some great cost, in the Russian churches. Would you care to comment further on this, given your involvement in changing this situation?

I am not aware that we have changed anything, I am simply aware of pursuing what spoke strongly to us. Primarily with Elizabeth's leadership, Gloriæ Dei Cantores has pursued what seemed to speak spiritually most strongly.

There seems to be a depth that is born out of struggle and suffering. The depth of need and desire for a better situation seems to well up from deep within, regardless of one's history: Eastern or Western. This is a common human plea, I would say, to the Almighty Creator, who, by my belief, desires only good and can be only good. The Russian Orthodox Church buildings represent this ideal, by presenting a little bit of heaven here on earth. You step out of your present situation and into a uplifting, beauty inspiring atmosphere, at least as far as man can represent. This is the situation within which Rachmaninoff also wrote and lived.

Man will always twist and manipulate good to serve his own evil purposes. This has been true of every religion, every government. But to the best of what we are able, we search for the good. This, to me is part of what Rachmaninoff was searching for and trying to relate. To me, it seems a cry from his heart, not an application of a musical doctrine.

The imposition of a doctrine was usually an attempt to control the humors—to be guarded from self-expression, the very sensationalism we try to avoid in our music-making while still speaking from the heart. A heart's conversation to God, with all its feeble attempts, is a most honest conversation. It doesn't mean everything is "truth," but it is honest. I believe it is possible that this was the mission and intent of the *All-Night Vigil*; the honesty cannot be controlled by a dogma, good or bad. Musicians and clergy have a long history of battles on this front, from Palestrina with his *Missa Papae Marcelli* for the Council of Trent to the present; organists weaving pop tunes into their improvisations is nothing new! This privilege we had to be involved in Russian sacred musical history may have also been born out of the connection we had as products of the Cold War. "Those folks over there" were suffering, and we wished good for them; maybe we sympathetically felt for them? The reaching out and connecting with them on a personal level—all humans have suffering—opened the door for a person-to-person connection, which then opened the door for personal relationships.

One such relationship was between Elizabeth and Georgy Sviridov. He sent one of his works, *The Ineffable Mystery*, and communicated back and forth with Elizabeth. It is a three-part work that, again, has so much to it. *Gloriæ Dei* sang this work in Russia on our third tour. We were to meet with him, but sadly, he passed on shortly before we were to arrive, so we ended up singing it at his grave. It was clear that he meant so much to the Russian people; his grave was *piled* with flowers. A composer, not well known here, was working to express and touch, honestly. And the impact was clear. So, I guess I would characterize the situation as simply the luck of coming into contact with other humans on this globe, within which we had a mutual experience and an identity we could connect through: suffering and honesty.

There are excerpts of Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil in at least two of the previous Russian-music releases. What led to the decision to record the whole work? And how did the members of the other three choirs, Peter Jermihov, your conductor for this work, and the soloists come to be involved?

During our original tours, Elizabeth reached out to gain help as to how to bring the best rendition and most authentic sound and pronunciation possible to our performances. In part, this was accomplished by several visits and a week of workshop/seminars giving by Peter and Irina Jermihov. Peter is a Russian-American whose parents came to the United States. Irina, his lovely wife, is a White Russian who lived in Siberia and was sent to Moscow to the conservatory to study. This is where Peter met her as they studied under Vladimir Minin. It was these two who came and poured out their passion for the sound and language pronunciation, which allowed us to be so successful in meeting and connecting with the Russian people while on those three tours.

So with that as the background, Peter and Irina got to know us better, and we them. So when Rachmaninoff's celebration was coming around, Peter reached out to us and suggested we do a recording. His desire was many-faceted: 1) to use a force large enough to accomplish the majesty of the work, and with enough control to manage the intimate, quiet requirements of the work; 2) to utilize enough octavists to achieve the genuine bass-heavy sound pyramid essential to the music; and 3) and probably greatest of them all, to bring a sense of the worship felt in and expressed through the prayers and texts, as so brilliantly brought to life or "twice prayed" by Rachmaninoff's setting. This is, in particular, why Peter turned to GDC, a group which, as monastics, knew the depth of the prayers and who are professional-level musicians. Peter also reached out to others that he knew through his own connections and exchanges, such as to the Patriarch Tikhon choir and to Tom Colohan of the Washington Master Chorale, and to many of his Russian friends and singers to create this composite ensemble. As always, it took a bit of work to meld our different experiences together, but I think the result was pretty special.

It was, in large part, this desire to set the spiritual expression of the work that also demanded a performance that didn't get mucked up with sensationalism, and that required the chants of the priest and the deacon so often left off by other recordings. To put this work in its setting, it needed to have those elements present.

I have admired the 1965 Sveshnikov recording since I heard it on an Angel/Melodiya LP set. In fact, I have collected well over a dozen recordings since, and heard several more. While most have admirable qualities, and a couple come close, none have quite met the standard that was set by that first experience. Some seem to strive for brilliance and excitement—the "sensationalism" you refer

to, I suspect—and most do not approach the sonority achieved with a choir of real Russian sub-bassos. (This is my first contact with the term “octavist,” which is nicely descriptive.) Frankly, very few avoid a feeling of secular distance from the intent of the music, and ironically, the ones that seem most devotional often have the most inapt sound. I was gripped—if I may be a bit dramatic here—by the depth of feeling to which you refer from the very first listening to your recording. So, do you think the difference in your singing of the All-Night Vigil is in truly believing what is being sung?

Yes! Yes, I do. Any good performer, whether an actor, speaker, or singer, must find the place where the situation/statement is true for them in order for the performance or expression to be perceived as honest. Even with the effort of many in our society to become devoid of emotion and to distance themselves, we still have an innate inner sense of when something rings *honestly*.

Additionally, it is interesting that in all the academic experiences I have had, and those of others which have been shared with me, the notes and rhythm, dynamics and tempi are addressed first. In fact, rarely to never is the text or emotional context of the work discussed or explored! What if we were to learn the text first? Study it? Journal on it? Study how the composer may have felt or expressed it—a *true* reading of his expression based on the understandings of his time and environment, not our imposition of what we want to say? Find its truest meaning, then, find its personal meaning to the artist/performer? This is one of the things that Gloriæ Dei Cantores strives to pursue in its music-making. So, in addition to believing, or singing from a place of belief, the process of text study brings a level of expression and depth that in many ways is rare if not unique to the process. And, by the way, this expression and depth is not dictated by the conductor, but agreed upon through discussion and argument by the performers.

One aspect of Gloriæ Dei Cantores, which is too essential to be missed, is how this whole all intermingles and informs our lives and calls. As you mentioned, often the professional choirs lack the heart and the amateur groups lack the standards to create a recording achieving some semblance of both, preferably in balance. This is a very important aspect to us; it stems out of our faith. It is the importance of bringing our best to our God and Creator. Singing out of tune is not pleasing to anyone, frankly! So, a striving for the truest rendition that speaks most honestly from the heart but disregards professional standards of excellence is inconsistent with bringing our best to a deserving God. At the very least, it causes the listener or church-going member to be distracted from the intent of worship by inaccuracies. This is true regardless of the medium. We tried to bring our truest holiday cheer to the Boston Pops on our many Christmas tours with them, regardless if it is spiritual or secular. We all have a secular side. Honesty....I find it very interesting how often the Psalmist rails at God, and then reminds God of his promise to not be angry at an honest person! How bold, but so genuine! This, I think, is so important to any creative process. It doesn't mean we glory in self, but it does mean we bring it along. We also bring along our desire for better and good for others, all the while raising our work to the highest professional responsibility and execution we can achieve at any given moment.

The sound of a choir with basses singing down below the bass staff is a remarkable feature of Russian choruses that is seldom matched in Western choir recordings of Russian liturgical music. And octavists are difficult to find, even in Russia; Rachmaninoff was asked by the conductor who was to lead the first performance where basses who could sing down to a B \flat below the bass staff might be found. Could you discuss specifically the range of these singers, what this rich sub-basso sound signifies in the Russian liturgy, and how you went about finding seven such singers for your

recording? They provide one of the most potent bass sounds that I can remember hearing in this work.

The human voice is such an interesting device, from the whistle tone of the uppermost soprano range to the lowest of the lows with an octavist (oktavist is the original spelling). It's quite amazing. Most of what I learned about the lower register was from three sources: 1) the late Craig Timberlake, a vocal professional and professor at Columbia University and the Manhattan School of Music; 2) being over in Russia and hearing them talk with our basses who have an octavist range and 3) the Internet site "oktavism.com."

The Italian school has the *basso profundo*, which is normally expected to perform clearly to C2, but the octavist is expected to go to B♭1, and preferably to G1. Another large distinction is that they are expected to go to G1 *without* amplification, auto tune or any other manipulation.

The octavist voice is so amazing and unusual. Isabel Haploid expressed this in one article of the *New York Times*, quoted on oktavist.com, when she wrote that "one of the four great oktavists of Russia ... balances a choir of one hundred and fifty if required." It is a special voice and *Gloriæ Dei* has two basses that would be qualified as octavists, but in this recording we had such a privilege to work with seven true octavists.

Peter and his wife Irina would be best to speak to regarding where they found all of them! I do know that most of them are probably friends or acquaintances of Peter's. Glenn Miller is one such person. He is very well known around the American Octavist, has perfect pitch and is a *very* helpful and un-assuming artist and man. I know Peter also secured a fantastic Ukrainian octavist who now drives semis in the U.S.! So aside from our octavists, Peter secured folks that he has gotten to know over the years.

In regards to the meaning of the low sound in the Russian music, and what it signifies, one thing I have heard, which seems quite plausible, is in the fifth movement of the *All-Night Vigil*. It has been said that the final bass descending line represents Simeon finally descending to his grave, having had his prayer to see the Messiah before he dies answered by God. I would love to add that, in the role of producer, I had to frequently ask to keep the bass' dynamic within balance of the rest of the ensemble, as they could have easily buried the whole choir with little effort. But it was a great mix/blend of voices and colors—such a wonderful sound—that it was easy to get lost in it and forget to keep the whole picture in front of us!

Fun note: After the recording was over they sang *Row, row, row your boat* several octaves down for fun; that was amazing to hear.

Finally, listening to this recording has sent me back to the catalogs to look for previous *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* releases that I have missed. I have discovered that you are reissuing some recordings in collections, but that a fair number are out of print. Are there plans to reissue more back-catalog recordings? And what does the future hold? I was very intrigued in learning that *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* performed Ralph Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and that you are restaging that work this fall with "world-class guest soloists." I found myself wondering if a recording of that might be forthcoming. I could imagine that an intensely faith-filled approach to that work would be revelatory as well, as would other RVW works mentioned. Regardless, what plans are there for the future to which devotees of your choir might look forward?

Sr. Genevieve will need to comment on the re-issues; I believe she is more up to date on that perspective.

(Sr. Genevieve: The first four recordings of the choir are the only four that are out of print. The rest of the recordings are available and in some cases reissued with different titles or covers. Over the past few years, we have created collections such as the *Early Music Collection*, *The American Collection*, the *Masters of Sacred Music Collection*, as well as two- or three-CD gift sets. Gloriæ Dei Cantores' discography includes the works of 180 composers and 234 first-ever recorded tracks, and is available at paracleterecordings.com, naxosdirect.com, amazon.com, and retail stores across the USA and Canada. Gloriæ Dei Cantores' complete discography is also available digitally worldwide over about 50 digital platforms including Spotify, iTunes, etc.)

As for Gloriæ Dei's future: Who knows! We are presently very focused on *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I know that RVW was pretty insistent on it not being intended for a church performance. I do believe in a typical church it would be hard to express his sense of journey in those spaces. The Church of the Transfiguration is a unique space, as its entire design was based on the journey of one's call through life. The church does not have pews but individual chairs so it allows us to turn the *stage* sideways, so folks can observe the journey of the pilgrim from one end to the other. Finding the most honest House Beautiful, Celestial City and Vanity Fair takes a great deal of work, so we are pretty knee-deep into that process.

We are also delving into Arvo Pärt and Ēriks Ešņvalds's work quite frequently. We did a performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* recently in the original German; that allowed us to bring the dramatic/operatic side to the concert stage. In addition, there are many places where his orchestral imagery lines up more accurately with the text in his native language. He did approve the English version, but that doesn't mean it most accurately reflects his vision.

And yes, *The Pilgrim's Progress* would be a very interesting project. Not to mention how all of these experiences inform our art and worship....

So, we don't have anything specific, but do have many irons in the fire.

RACHMANINOFF *All-Night Vigil*, op. 37 • Peter Jermihov, cond; Mariya Berezovska (a); Dmitri Ivanchenko (*Priest*, t); Vadim Gan (*Deacon*); Gloriæ Dei Cantores; Members of St. Romanos Cappella; Members of the Patriarch Tikhon Ch; Members of the Washington Master Ch • GLORIÆ DEI CANTORES 063 (SACD: 69:53 📀)



Rachmaninoff: All-Night Vigil
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There have been many recordings of the Rachmaninoff *All-Night Vigil*—most with the inaccurate title *Vespers*—since the first by Alexander Sveshnikov was issued in a licensing agreement between Melodiya and Angel Records back in 1965. The title error is explained in conductor Peter Jermihov’s excellent notes, as are many points of interest regarding this marvelous work’s origins, history, and significance. Jermihov is an American of Russian parentage who has studied Russian music in Russia, notably under Ilya Musin in St. Petersburg, the teacher of many of the finest conductors that country has produced. He is recognized as an expert in and passionate advocate of Orthodox choral music, having also studied with Vladimir Minin, one of Russia’s foremost choral conductors. He leads this performance, rather than Richard Pugsley, director of Gloriæ Dei Cantores, because of the special insights he brings to the performance of this music.

The original title of the work is *The Most Important Hymns of the All-Night Vigil*, and that is most revealing of the composer’s intent. It is not a liturgical work, though there have been some attempts to use it as such, but rather a concert work drawing from and honoring the musical traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church. Rachmaninoff selected 10 chants of Vespers and Matins, with a concluding hymn from First Hour, to which he added five chant melodies of his own devising to texts from these services. First performances, led by Nicholai Danilin in 1915, were met with great success, but the 1917 Revolution, the composer’s departure from Russia at that time, and the subsequent suppression of church music by the communist regime under the policy of state atheism effectively eliminated the work from the repertoire for more than three decades. It was restored through the work of Nicolai Matveyev, conductor of the choir at Church of the Transfiguration in Moscow, who began to use the hymns from the *All-Night Vigil* in services at his church, and performed the whole of the work on the eve of the composer’s birthday. His efforts brought the work to the attention of Sveshnikov, who had studied with Danilin, and led to his recording with the State Academic Russian Choir.

There have since been many recordings in the West, though—and here I am generalizing—the tendency has been to emphasize the dramatic elements of the work and the brilliance of the writing while slighting the essential devotional nature of the piece. The recent Charles Bruffy recording on Chandos, beautifully sung and complete with opening sentences by the priest or deacon, is a notable exception, though contrary to many reviewers I find it a bit cold. Others, like those of King’s College, Cambridge, are more pious, but have entirely the wrong sound. Russian choirs seem to get it best, and

the benchmark Sveshnikov, which was not even released in the officially non-religious Soviet Union, has gradually been joined by others from native choirs, notably by Valery Polyansky (1986) and—a particularly fine recording with a Russian church choir—Alexei Pouzakov (1998). Only the Polyansky is easy to acquire on disc. The 2008 Melodiya CD release of the Sveshnikov is currently unavailable, but a CD-R or download, from a source which is not the original label, can be acquired.

But perhaps there is no need, for this new recording has the essential sound of the Russian choirs, with their bass-centered sonority, and tempos which allow the music to unfold in the measured pace of a devotional service. Still, it never gets heavy or loses the essential suppleness of the rhythms. Better yet, the text-based spiritual approach to the music, described in the accompanying interview with producer Richard Pugsley, stirs at least as deeply as those three Russian recordings. To achieve this, the 42-voice *Gloriæ Dei Cantores*, choir of the Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans, Massachusetts, has lived with the work for many years, including while on tours to perform and study in Russia. The choir is joined by singers from other choirs steeped in the tradition from around the USA: Jermihov's St. Romanos Cappella, the Patriarch Tikon Choir, and the Washington Master Chorale. At 77 voices, the resulting ensemble is close in size to the approximately 80-voice Moscow Synodal School Choir that premiered the work, though that was an ensemble of men and boys. Here the upper voices are clearly those of women, as in most recordings, but they maintain an admirable purity of sound. The bass section boasts not just one or two powerful contrabasses, but seven, and unlike the reedy *bombarde* achieved on some other recordings—however impressively—these blended voices produce a *contrabourdon* of remarkable potency and warmth. I am particularly pleased that these octavists are so subtly deployed: commanding but clearly not used just to impress. There is one exception: the sonorous “Amen” after the opening call to worship. So powerful are the low basses here that if the volume is set to this, the subsequent hymn sounds rather distant and dim in comparison until the volume is readjusted. The opening sentences of several of the hymns, omitted in many recordings, are intoned by bass Vadim Gan, a protodeacon at the Synod of Bishops' Cathedral in New York, and by tenor Dmitry Ivanchenko, a soloist at the National Opera of Ukraine. Ivanchenko and his Kiev colleague, mezzo-soprano Mariya Berezovska, sing the solos with security, native style, and great feeling, the tenor in particular with an affective plangency.

If I have a concern, and it is minor, it regards the engineering. This is particularly surprising given the presence of recording legend Keith O. Johnson, but the sound of the choir is a bit opaque, even in high-res, and though attractive of tone it lacks presence, even when compared with the 50-year old Sveshnikov (on the remastered Melodiya CD) and certainly with the superlative Chandos SACD. The soloists fare better in clarity and vividness, but even those who know Russian will usually need the supplied texts in Cyrillic for the chorus. Transliteration and English translation are also supplied. While referring to the texts, you will have the pleasure of seeing the gorgeously illustrated booklet, with a background on each hymn and photographs of Russian churches, countryside, and icons.

In any case, the sound is more than sufficient, and does not detract from the overall impact of this release. The goals of this presentation are laid out by Jermihov in the last section of his notes: to perform this music as Rachmaninoff would have expected to hear it, and to approach the work as a religious experience based on belief in the words sung. By the standards set in Jermihov's essay, both have been accomplished brilliantly. The result is one of the very finest recordings this work has ever received.

—Ronald E. Grames