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28 The genius of
Sergei Rachmaninov

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Plus our favourite Rachmaninov work

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Sergei Rachmaninov

All-Night Vigil (Vespers)

The composer's love of the music and rituals of the Orthodox Church were distilled in this masterpiece; **Daniel Jaffé** finds the best recording



The composer

Aged 41 at the time of the *All-Night Vigil*'s first performance, Rachmaninov's life had by this stage encompassed significant peaks and troughs. The deepest trough had come in 1897 when, conducted by a possibly drunk Alexander Glazunov, his First Symphony had suffered a disastrous premiere, leading to three years of depression and writer's block that was only remedied by psychotherapy. Among the highs were the huge success of his Second Piano Concerto in 1901, his marriage to Natalia Satina and the birth of their two daughters, and the adulation that accompanied him on tours to Europe and the US.

BBC RADIO 3 Building a Library is broadcast on Radio 3 at 9.30am each Saturday as part of *Record Review*. A highlights podcast is available on BBC Sounds.

The work

World War I had been raging for less than a year when Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil* was premiered on 23 March 1915 (or 10 March, according to the pre-Revolutionary Russian calendar). The all-male voice Moscow Synodal Choir, presenting a charity concert in aid of the war wounded, had been given special permission to perform the work in Moscow's Great Hall of the Noble Assembly. With nationalist feelings running high and the public's appetite for Orthodox Church music growing, Rachmaninov's *a cappella*

of ancient *znamenny* chant and Orthodox Church traditions. As director of the Synodal School, Smolensky was already instigating a glorious renaissance in Orthodox music, largely fulfilled by such pupils of his as Alexander Grechaninov, Pavel Chesnokov and Alexander Kastalsky. Recognising Rachmaninov's talent, Smolensky encouraged him to write further liturgical works, one suggestion being the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom; Rachmaninov eventually composed this in close consultation with Kastalsky,

He desired to create a work true to the spirit of the services he recalled from childhood

masterpiece was a hit; within a month, the choir gave four further performances. As Rachmaninov confessed some years afterwards, the Synodal Choir's performance 'gave me an hour of the happiest satisfaction... the magnificent Synodal singers produced any effect I had imagined, and even surpassed at times the ideal tone-picture I had had in my mind when composing this work.'

Rachmaninov had loved Orthodox Church music since his visits, aged about ten, to the churches of St Petersburg accompanying his devout maternal grandmother. As he later recalled, he often made his way beneath the gallery to relish 'singing of unrivalled beauty' by the cathedral choirs. While a student at the Moscow Conservatory, he composed a choral concerto which was noticed by Stepan Smolensky, the formidable scholar

completing it the year after Smolensky's death in 1909.

During the winter of 1914-15, following Russia's disastrous Battle of Tannenberg, Rachmaninov was filled with a desire to create a work true to the spirit of the Orthodox services he fondly remembered. A recent performance of his Liturgy had left him dismayed by the work's apparent inadequacy, and he now wished to write something more authentically Russian, using 'the magnificent melodies' he recalled from childhood.

Kastalsky, told of his latest ambition, promptly sent Rachmaninov the *Obikhod*, the collection of venerable chants used by the Russian Orthodox Church. In all, ten of Rachmaninov's 15 movements are based on ancient chants from that collection, the remainder (movements 1, 3, 6, 10 and 11) being based on melodies of his own



Historic tradition:
St Petersburg Chamber Choir
sings the *All-Night Vigil*;
(below) Russian prisoners
after the Battle of Tannenberg

invention – ‘a conscious counterfeit of the ritual’, as he himself described them.

Dedicated to Smolensky’s memory, Rachmaninov’s *All-Night Vigil* (also known in English, misleadingly, as his Vespers) is essentially a concert work rather than one for liturgical use. Lasting just over an hour – or rather longer if including optional liturgical chanting – it falls broadly into two sections. First, the Vespers (Nos 1-6), involving hymns which recall the world’s history from its Creation leading to Christ’s birth. This includes a movement particularly close to Rachmaninov’s heart, the Song of Simeon, which ends with the basses descending to a tenebrous low B flat, a sonic parallel to the sun descending beyond the horizon in the course of the service. Matins (Nos 7-15), the work’s more lively and dramatic half, anticipates dawn, symbolic of both the birth and resurrection of Christ. Its highlights include No. 8, ‘Praise the name of the Lord’, with its dramatic change of mood as the church, having been in near darkness, is fully lit, and the royal doors are opened. Then follows the most dramatic movement, recalling Christ’s resurrection (and including a passage Rachmaninov quoted

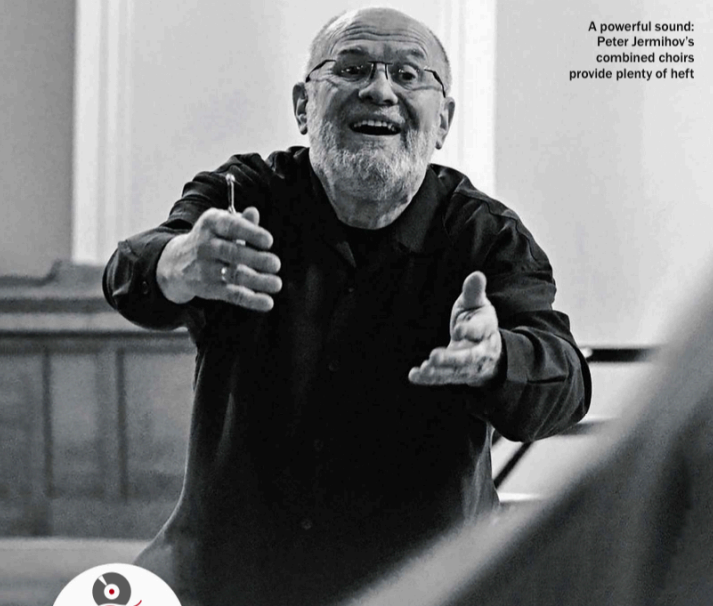


decades later in the climax of his final orchestral work, the *Symphonic Dances*).

Rachmaninov’s attempt to better his earlier Liturgy succeeded magnificently. While the Liturgy is very much a late-Romantic creation, the *All-Night Vigil* appears almost timeless with its harmonic restraint and clear roots in the old chants; yet it also shows a remarkable sophistication, through Rachmaninov’s use of long-term harmonic tension allied with some audacious masterstrokes involving his dramatic use of entries by different combinations of voices.

The *Vigil*’s score offers fairly sparse tempo directions, Rachmaninov having assumed that his performers would be familiar with how its various liturgical hymns were traditionally sung. However, after the Russian Revolution of 1917, that Orthodox tradition was soon repressed, and the *All-Night Vigil* was scarcely heard until Alexander Sveshnikov’s pioneering complete recording of 1965 (then available strictly for export or educational purposes). Unfamiliar with the tradition Rachmaninov had taken for granted, Sveshnikov and his successors were faced with sometimes gnomic tempo indications: the instruction *Ne skoro* (‘Not hurried’) that heads the joyous movement No. 8 has prompted a range of tempos from Sveshnikov’s very slow and stately 70 beats per minute (bpm) to the quite brisk and exuberant 120 bpm of Nikolai Korniev’s 1993 recording. Arguably, such problems raised by the score have only been solved since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Turn the page to discover our recommended recordings of Rachmaninov’s All-Night Vigil



A powerful sound: Peter Jermihov's combined choirs provide plenty of heft



Faithful to the letter and the spirit



Peter Jermihov (conductor)

Glorïae Dei Cantores
Paraclete Recordings GDCC 063

It's been often claimed that Sveshnikov's 1965 recording – considered by many the best all-round among Soviet and Russian productions – is somehow 'authentic'. Which is remarkable, since his USSR State Academic Russian Choir was essentially a radio ensemble that regularly performed Soviet mass songs and opera choruses rather than liturgical music. While there's no denying the impressive sound and heft of its basses, in several respects the choir's sound and style – with its often woeful, wavering tenors, and its sopranos

over-sentimentalising the music with 'expressive' scoops between notes – would have dismayed leading choir trainers of Rachmaninov's time.

Today, thanks to scholars such as Vladimir Morosan, we know a great deal more about the choral style Rachmaninov expected. Meanwhile, several recent

The warm and rich-toned choir gives an engaging and uplifting performance

recordings match the best Russian choirs for vocal heft and outclass them in accurate pitching and ensemble while also showing a greater awareness of the performance tradition Rachmaninov wrote for.

Best of these is Peter Jermihov's 2017 recording, involving the combined forces of the American Glorïae Dei Cantores and voices from Saint Romanos Cappella, Patriarch Tikhon Choir and

Three other great recordings



Matthew Best (conductor)

The Corydon Singers' chant-free 1990 recording was the first by a Western choir to match significantly the heft of Russian choirs while trumping them in accuracy of tuning and ensemble. Despite initial disappointments – the opening chorus, though glorious, sounds a touch stilted, while the alto soloist in the second movement is accurate but lacking in character – this becomes a compelling account, particularly through the dramatic Matins sequence, thanks to Matthew Best's superb direction and his instinct for the right tempo, as in the joyous No. 8. (Hyperion CDA 30016)



Risto Joost (conductor)

Those attuned to the wilder sounds of Russian choirs may be suspicious of Leipzig's MDR Radio Choir's highly polished singing. Yet this consummate account, recorded in 2016 under Risto Joost's direction, scrupulously follows Rachmaninov's score, and although the singers' expressiveness is understated, the sense of joy at No. 8 is palpable, the rhythms dance-like and infectiously pointed. There is also a strong sense of cumulative drama through the Matins section, and a suitably awestruck quality

the Washington Master Chorale. The resulting choir is a bit smaller than what Rachmaninov had in mind, yet the sopranos and altos' relatively powerful adult voices easily balance the superb lower male voices, of which the bass section includes no fewer than seven *basso profundos* (or 'octavists'), far more than were available for the work's premiere.

The performance's authentic Slavic flavour is further enhanced by the impressive bass of Vadim Gan singing the Deacon's part, and by two soloists from the National Opera of Ukraine, mezzo Mariya Berezovska and tenor Dmitry Ivanchenko.

in the penultimate movement before the final celebratory hymn. (*Genuin GEN 17476*)



Steven Fox (conductor)
Endorsed by Morosan, no less, this recording – made in 2020 but only just released – is exceptionally fine

in many ways. Steven Fox's long and empathetic relationship with the work tells throughout, and his Clarion Choir, relatively small but exceptionally well balanced, has a very fine complement of low basses and a particularly fine tenor soloist in John Ramseyer. There's just one blemish: the choir loses pitch through the long Resurrection sequence (No. 9), so the next movement, supposedly in the same key, starts a semi-tone higher. (*Pentatone PTC5187019*)

And one to avoid...



Valery Polyansky's live 1986 recording with the USSR Ministry of Culture State Chamber Choir used to be regularly

recommended 'for a performance that comes from the centre of the tradition'. The choir certainly sounds focused and sings reliably in tune – unlike any other 20th-century Russian recording of the work – and its contralto soloist is the legendary Irina Arkhipova, albeit rather past her prime. Alas, the choir's performance sounds dutiful yet dispirited throughout, and apparently quite disengaged with the text.

In the generous resonance of Orleans's Church of the Transfiguration – captured in atmospheric sound, particularly on SACD – the choir sounds warm and rich-toned, yet with the altos summoning a clarion edge for their first entry in the dramatic Resurrection sequence (No. 9). The practicalities of performing in such an acoustic means that some of Rachmaninov's dynamic contrasts can appear rather muted; and tempos are a touch on the stately side, though in No. 8 this accentuates the bell-like accents. Altogether, this is an engaging and uplifting performance.



Unearthing choral gems:
Tenebrae sings works
by Chesnokov; (below)
Maximilian Steinberg

Continue the journey...

We suggest five works to explore after Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil*

For more choral **Rachmaninov**, try his earlier *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*.

Although he eventually dismissed it as unworthy of the Russian Orthodox services of his childhood, it is a fine work whose main sin is to sound obviously a work of the late-19th century in its expressive harmonic style. (**Flemish Radio Choir/Kaspars Putniņš** *Glossa GCD 922203*).

Russian Orthodox music's turn-of-the-century renaissance

would have been impossible without the precedent of **Tchaikovsky's** setting of the *St John Chrysostom Liturgy*. It is often said to be more of historic than of musical importance – his publisher won the court case against the Imperial Chapel who had insisted on its right to oversee and censor all music performed in the church – but one has only to hear the magnificent choral outburst of 'Come, Let Us Worship' to appreciate Rachmaninov's debt to this earlier work. (**USSR Ministry of Culture State Chamber Choir/Valery Polyansky** *CDK Music CDK0085*).

An important mentor for Rachmaninov while he composed his major liturgical settings was **Alexander Kastalsky**



Steinberg composed *Passion Week* while civil war convulsed Russia

(1856-1926), himself a highly regarded and prolific composer of church music. His settings of the Great Doxology (which form part of the hymns of the Orthodox Vigil), composed 1904-05, offer several pre-echoes of Rachmaninov's *Vigil*, and are among his many fine works worth getting to know. (**Conspirare/Craig Hella**

Johnson *Hammonia Mundi HMU 807526*).

A close colleague of Kastalsky's and like him a pupil of the great Smolensky,

Pavel Chesnokov (1877-1944) in his 500 or so religious choruses uses a harmonic restraint similar to Rachmaninov's *Vigil* yet distinctly his own. His 'Gentle Light' and 'Cherubic Hymn' well exemplify his understated, succinct yet effective style. (**Tenebrae/Nigel Short** *Signum SIGCD 900*).

Finally, a surprising and long-buried work by a teacher of Shostakovich's, **Maximilian Steinberg** (1883-1946) – furthermore, composed between 1920-23, largely while civil war convulsed Russia after the Revolution. Not heard in full until 2014, his *Passion Week*, like Rachmaninov's *Vigil*, makes extensive use of Orthodox chants with masterful use of a richly divided choir. (**The Clarion Choir/Steven Fox** *Naxos 8.573665*).