

All-Night Vigil (Vespers)

Sergey Rakhmaninov (1873 - 1943)

As his recordings conclusively demonstrate, Rakhmaninov was one of the very greatest of pianists, who enjoyed a hugely successful international solo career after his emigration to America in 1917. However, it is as a composer he is remembered, and though his popular reputation rests on just a handful of works - principally the second symphony, the second and third piano concertos and the *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini* - in fact his output was extensive and wide-ranging. Although his choral music comprises just three major works - the *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* (1910), the choral symphony *The Bells* (1913) and the *All-Night Vigil* (1915) - all are of the very finest quality.

Rakhmaninov was not satisfied with his *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*, and so five years later embarked upon another sacred work - a setting of the All-Night Vigil, commonly referred to as 'Rakhmaninov's Vespers'. This is a somewhat misleading title since the All-Night Vigil actually comprises four services altogether: Vespers, Matins, Lauds and Prime. The Russian Orthodox Church marks the liturgical day from one sunset to the next, and so Sunday services actually begin on Saturday evening with Vespers and continue through the night until Sunday morning, when Matins, Lauds and Prime are celebrated.

The *Vigil* was composed early in 1915. From the outset it was recognised as a masterpiece of choral writing, and one of the pinnacles of Russian Orthodox church music. The text is written in Old Church Slavonic which was, and remains, the liturgical language of the Russian Orthodox Church. There is no reason why the piece should not be performed during a service, but its technical difficulty and large scale place it beyond the scope of all but the most able choirs, suggesting that it was intended for concert rather than liturgical use, though Rakhmaninov himself made no pronouncement on this point.

Although he was not a practising Christian, Rakhmaninov held in high regard the poetry, music and traditions of the Orthodox Church, in much the same way that in this country Vaughan Williams, a self-confessed agnostic, was repeatedly inspired by the traditions of the Anglican Church. And just as Vaughan Williams was seeking to re-connect English music to its ancient roots after a lengthy period of Austro-German dominance, so too Rakhmaninov, in his choral music at least, rejected the German and Italian musical influences of the previous two centuries. Following the lead set by Tchaikovsky in his 1882 *Vespers*, he turned for inspiration to the early Russian Church's traditional chants. The entire piece appears to be based on authentic Orthodox chants, but in only nine of the fifteen movements are these genuine; in the other movements Rakhmaninov created his own chant-like melodies, and these he described as 'conscious counterfeits'.

Rakhmaninov's immensely varied and imaginative vocal scoring, much of it for at least eight parts, is one of the most striking features of the *Vigil*, and has aptly been described as 'choral orchestration'. He employs a number of techniques to achieve these extraordinary sonorities, including the judicious choice of solo voices, small groups or the full chorus; a wide dynamic range, from hushed *pianissimos* to full-blooded triple-*fortes*; the careful placing of the voices in high, middle or low registers. Perhaps the two techniques most obviously borrowed from orchestral writing are the way in which all sections of the choir, including the basses, are regularly given important melodic leads, sometimes doubled at the octave to give a different colouring; and the spacing of the harmonies, from simple, closely-written four part chords to rich, multi-divisional ones covering nearly four octaves, very much as strings would be orchestrated. Rakhmaninov's melodic style, though, is very different from the lush romanticism of his great orchestral works; listeners expecting soaring, expansive tunes are likely to be disappointed. Because his melodic lines grow out of Orthodox chants, they move either in steps or small intervals, and despite the grand scale of the work as a whole, this imparts a very personal and intimate dimension to the music.

After the 1917 revolution all church music was suppressed, and the *Vigil* was then only rarely heard. It was not until the 1960s that it became known in the West. After the first performance Rakhmaninov commented, '*Even in my dreams I could not have imagined that I would write such a work.*' As we listen to this extraordinary, magnificent piece of music, it becomes apparent why he made such a remark.

VESPERS

1. *Priidite, poklonimsya* (*O come let us bow down before the Lord*). After an introductory response comes the first canticle (the equivalent of the Latin 'Venite'), a short, impassioned chorus repeated four times.
2. *Blagoslove, dushe moya, Ghospoda* (*Praise the Lord, O my Soul*). This text is from Psalm 104. A solo mezzo-soprano supported by male voices alternates with ethereal passages for upper voices.
3. *Blazhen muzh* (*Blessed is the man*). The text is from Psalms 1, 2 and 3. Each verse is closely

harmonised for only three or four parts, contrasting with the repeated *Alleluia* for divided full choir, which gradually increases in intensity before coming to a quiet close.

4. *Svete tikhiy (Hail, gladdening light)*. A Kiev chant based on just four notes provides the melody, heard first in the tenor section. The mood is quiet and reflective throughout.

5. *Nine otpushchayeshi (Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace)*. This setting of the Nunc Dimittis is based on another Kiev chant. It opens and closes with a tenor solo set against a gentle rocking figure. It was this piece that Rakhmaninov asked to be performed at his own funeral.

6. *Bogoroditse Devo (Rejoice, Mother of God)* is a simple setting of the Slavonic version of the 'Ave Maria'.

MATINS

7. *Shestoslamiye (The lesser Doxology)*. The first section is a majestic setting of the first part of the 'Gloria', culminating in what is perhaps the work's most striking harmonic gesture - a breathtaking 11-part chord-cluster. In contrast, the second section is a short, contemplative chorale.

8. *Kvalite imia Ghospodne (O praise the name of the Lord)*. The text is from Psalms 135 and 136. An animated theme for the sopranos and tenors is set against a broad melody for the altos and basses singing together in octaves.

9. *Blagosloven yesi, Ghospodi (Blessed art thou, O Lord)*. This hymn in praise of the Resurrection is one of the most dramatic movements of the whole work.

10. *Voskreseniye Khristovo videvshe (Having beheld Christ's resurrection)* is another Resurrection hymn.

11. *Velichit dusha moya Ghospoda (My soul doth magnify the Lord)* is the longest movement of the work, alternating the verses of the Magnificat with the antiphon 'Greater in honour than the Cherubim'.

LAUDS

12. *Slavosloviye velikoye (The greater Doxology)*. The opening is a setting of the 'Gloria in excelsis', and is followed by a series of contrasting rhythmic sections.

PRIME

13. *Tropar: Dnes' spaseniye (Day of our salvation)*, and

14. *Tropar: Voskres iz groba (Risen from the tomb)*. These two short Resurrection hymns are alternatives; in a liturgical context only one would be used.

15. *Vzbrannoy voyevode (Praise to the Mother of God)*. The final movement, a hymn to the Virgin Mary, is a joyous affirmation of faith.

programme notes by John Bawden

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