



SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Vespers, Op. 37

Thursday, March 18, 2010 | 7:30pm

St. Matthew's Cathedral

WRITTEN BY:

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Notes on the Program

On the eve of the great festivals of the Christian year the Russian Orthodox Church holds a vigil service, which combines the liturgies of Vespers and Matins into a single, all-night service. The service contains a wide variety of liturgical forms, from readings—done, of course, by a single voice—through solo chants and litanies alternating solo singer and chorus, to purely choral hymns and canticles. It is the fifteen purely choral movements of the Vigil Service—the great choral pillars of the service—that Rachmaninoff sets in his opus 37.

Many of the texts sung in the Vigil Service will be familiar to Western churchgoers—the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis, the Gloria, several Doxologies, lines from the Psalms, even "Lord, open thou my lips. . ." The positioning of these texts is, however, different in the Russian liturgy from their position in Western liturgies; and those who know their text of the Magnificat and the Gloria will find them altered textually as well. Hovering over the entire service is the great Russian tradition of sacred choral music, with its prohibition of instrumental music in the church and its reliance on the immemorial melodies of Russian Orthodox chant. Nine movements of the Rachmaninoff are identified in the score as being based on chant melodies, and it's hard not to suspect that other movements are as well: if the Greater Gloria, the twelfth movement, is based on chant, how can the Lesser Gloria, the sixth movement, which shares the same material, not be based on chant? One other sacred Russian sound haunts the Rachmaninoff Vigil Service: the sound of bells. One can hear their tolling in the fifth movement—the Nunc Dimittis—and most clearly at the stunning climax of the Greater Gloria (where the bell-sounds also recall that very different sacred Russian masterwork, the Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms*).

Rachmaninoff wrote his setting of the choral sections of the Vigil Service in the early months of 1915. His service, which is particularly an Easter vigil service, was first performed on March 10, 1915. The performance was not a part of a service, but was given in Moscow by the choir of the Ouspensky Cathedral as a fund-raising concert for the War Relief Committee. It thus began its life as a concert work—it was, says Rachmaninoff's biographer, "repeated five times, before crowded houses"—rather than as a liturgical work *per se*. It was published as Rachmaninoff's op. 37 under the title "Vsenoshchnoe Bdenie"—roughly, "Vesper Vigil." Since then it has appeared under a variety of titles in English-speaking countries: as "Songs of the Church" (its title upon its first English publication); as "Vesper Mass"; "All Night Vigil"; "Vigil Service" (perhaps the best title, and hence the one used in these notes); and "Vespers" (the



most-used title). Its fate in the country of its origin has been less confusing, but more final: two years after its first performance the Russian Revolution made it an anachronism in its own land.

Rachmaninoff himself felt that his Vigil Service, along with his choral symphony *The Bells*, was his best work. (This, by the way, puts the Choral Arts Society in the position of having performed both of Rachmaninoff's favorites among his own works.) He was particularly proud of the fifth chorus, the *Nunc Dimittis*, and hoped that it would be performed at his funeral. Critical opinion also sees the Vigil Service as one of Rachmaninoff's best pieces: its unending inventiveness in choral textures and its imaginative use of the chants which serve as its melodic basis suggest that it might well have become a point of departure for a school of Russian church music rather than what history made it: the final glorious monument of the music of the Russian Orthodox Church as an established state religion.

After considerable debate we've decided to perform Rachmaninoff's Vigil Service without any of the solo chants which form the remainder of the Russian Orthodox vigil service. This is, finally, a concert: and a sacred concert may well bring across more of the message of Rachmaninoff's music than a hybrid, half-concert and half service, would. This does mean, however, that the music which was meant to be spread out over several hours, the choral pillars of a structure also containing much less dense music, will be heard tonight as a continuous series of fifteen pieces for large mixed chorus. Under these conditions it's a good idea for the listener to bear in mind the general architecture of the service: a Vesper section ending with the Ave Maria; then a Matins section telling the story of the Resurrection, leading to the double climax of the Magnificat and the Greater Gloria, and ending with the three hymns proper to the season.