

## **Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)**

### ***Vespers***

It was in the depths of winter, 1915, when Sergei Rachmaninov composed his unsurpassed setting of the *Vsenoshchnoye bdeniye (All-Night Vigil)*, generally known simply as *Vespers*; it was to be Rachmaninov's last large-scale composition before he left Russia in 1917. Even in 1915, Russia was in a state of internal chaos, in addition to the devastation being wreaked externally by the ravages of the First World War. Rachmaninov had spent a large part of the autumn of 1914 on a tour of southern Russia with Sergei Koussevitsky, raising money for the war effort, and the concert for which the *Vespers* were composed was also a fundraising venture for the same cause. The *Vespers* were first performed on 23 March 1915, in a concert given by the Moscow Synodal Choir, and it was to a former director of the choir – Stepan Smolensky – that Rachmaninov dedicated the composition.

The premiere itself was directed by Nikolai Danilin, who had been astounded when Rachmaninov played parts of the *Vespers* to him on the piano. After hearing the extraordinarily low tessitura of the bass parts, Danilin said to Rachmaninov, 'Where are we going to find such basses? They are as rare as asparagus at Christmas!' The composer, however, was confident in the ability of his singers, saying later, 'I was well aware of the demands I could put upon Russian basses! The audiences always listened with breathless suspense to the descent of the choir into the nether regions.'

It is possible that Rachmaninov's decision to set the texts of the *All-Night Vigil* was in part a response to the increasing discontent, disorder, and sedition that was threatening the established order of Russian society. While the eventual combustion of the Bolshevik Revolution may not have seemed inevitable at the time of composition, that Rachmaninov was writing such a deeply spiritual expression of faith while society was on the brink of catastrophe (and the Russian church was about to be suppressed) lends the work an extra significance. Rachmaninov was, by his own admission, not religious and he did not regularly attend services of the Russian Orthodox Church. However, he had been fascinated since childhood by the churches he visited with his grandmother, and particularly by the music that he heard there. He said of these visits: 'I took less interest in God and religious worship than in the singing, which was of unrivalled beauty, especially in the cathedrals, where one frequently heard the best choirs of St Petersburg. I usually took pains to find room underneath the gallery and never missed a single note. Thanks to my good memory, I also remembered most of what I heard.'

The chant that Rachmaninov had heard as 'an urchin of 10 or 11' forms the foundation of his *Vespers*. There are fifteen sections to Rachmaninov's setting, and nine of these are based on the three central chant forms of the Russian church: the original Znamenny chant of Byzantine derivation, the 'Greek' chant that had probably arrived in Moscow in the seventeenth century, and the 'Kiev' chant which may have originated as a variant of Znamenny from the Ukraine. But, while Rachmaninov's recognisable use of chant creates an immediate link with the Russian Church, his *Vespers* setting is not a 'pure' one of the *All-Night Vigil*. He altered the structure of the Vigil by incorporating elements of both *Vespers* and *Matins*, both by adding to and

omitting from his setting elements of the liturgy: for example, both Resurrection hymns (Nos. 13 and 14) would never be sung in the same service.

Therefore, Rachmaninov's *Vespers* were written for performance in concert, rather than as part of a service, and for this reason it is likely that the function of these *Vespers* at the time of writing was a nationalist, rather than liturgical one. A compositional *tour de force* for Rachmaninov, his *Vespers* setting contains Orthodox chant to make its association with the Russian church immediately clear, but the removal of this music and text from a liturgical context strips the *Vespers* of the function that this music would serve in a church service. If anything, the *Vespers* are as much an assertion of nationalism as a religious statement, using the familiarity of the liturgical chant and text as a symbol of societal unity. A case can be made for Rachmaninov's *Vespers* fulfilling a role similar to that of the *Requiems* by Verdi and Dvořák, and Brahms's *Ein Deutches Requiem*. In his 2004 book *Listening to Reason*, Michael Steinburg argued that these three works are 'sacred utterances', but are removed from the ritual, ceremony, and authority of the church. Instead, by using texts familiar to the audience from the liturgy and/or Bible, an instant collective bond and voice is formed through the connection of memory and commemoration; this collective voice, however, is that of the people, rather than of the nation. Rachmaninov's *Vespers* can be understood as fitting the same pattern.

For those whose experience of the music and text for evening prayer (vespers or evensong) and morning prayer (matins) is based in the Roman Catholic or Protestant traditions, the liturgy and music of the Russian church can seem cloaked in clouds of mystery and incense. However, points of familiarity appear immediately: in Rachmaninov's *Vespers*, the fifth section is the *Nunc dimittis*, and the eleventh is the *Magnificat* – both canticles of Anglican evening prayer and Roman Catholic compline and vespers respectively. The twelfth section is familiar as the *Gloria* from the Ordinary of the Mass. However, despite the familiarity of some of the texts, Rachmaninov's setting of them is unique. Such extraordinary control of vocal tessitura and creation of beautiful and evocative timbres has a transfixing quality which does transport the listener into a mysterious and exotic territory. Rachmaninov's setting of *Vsenoshchnoye bdeniye* is one that keeps its audience in a state of breathless suspense and awe from the first note until the last.

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