

## PROGRAMME NOTES

Nationalism was a potent force in nineteenth-century music, especially in Russia. Composers such as Glinka, Dargomyzhsky, and The Five (Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov) turned to national subjects and folk songs as a means to free themselves from the domination of foreign music. Somewhat surprisingly, a similar movement existed in the field of Russian church music. Despite the fact the Orthodox Church prided itself on its insular sense of Tradition, unbroken by the ideals of Reformation and Protestantism, by the beginning of the nineteenth century the music of the Orthodox Church was essentially western in design and form, and had largely forgotten its chant roots. The nationalist revival in the field of sacred music was centred on an institution, the Moscow Synodal School of Church Singing. Stepan Smolensky, Director of the Synodal School (1886-1901) and Professor of Church Music at the Moscow Conservatory, encouraged composers to incorporate the old chants and techniques of Russian choral folk songs in their works. Orthodox liturgical music reacquired a specifically Russian character, and the period from the 1880s until the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution constituted a golden age in its production.

A student at the Moscow Conservatory at the beginning of this period and a member of Smolensky's class in 1890-91, Rachmaninov's first sacred works were minor and remained unpublished during the composer's lifetime. In 1897 Smolensky suggested he set the standard Orthodox Eucharist service, the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*. At the time Rachmaninov was undergoing a compositional crisis following the disastrous premiere of his *First Symphony*, and it was not until 1910 that the *Liturgy* emerged as Rachmaninov's first major sacred work. After a subsequent performance of the *Liturgy* Rachmaninov expressed dissatisfaction with its style, providing the impulse to compose the *All-Night Vigil*.

Commonly but incorrectly called the 'Vespers,' Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil* is dedicated to the memory of Stepan Smolensky. It was premiered, as a benefit for war relief, by the Moscow Synodal Choir on March 10, 1915. Public and critical reaction was enthusiastic, and the Vigil received four more performances that same month. Kastalsky wrote, "Rachmaninov's new composition, *All-Night Vigil*, is undoubtedly a contribution of great importance to our church's musical literature ... Of unusual value is this artist's loving and conscientious attitude towards our church chants, for in this lies the promise of a splendid future for our liturgical music." Sadly, this would not be the case; after the Revolution the Moscow Synodal School and its Choir were disbanded, religion was banned, and Rachmaninov went into self-exile in the West, never to compose another sacred work.

The *All-Night Vigil* has since become part of the canon of western art music, but how should an audience in British Columbia in 2006 approach an hour-long unaccompanied setting of an Orthodox service, sung in a language (Church Slavonic) which is obscure even to Russian speakers? It is important to note at the outset that the *All-Night Vigil* is not a church service. Although Rachmaninov never left any indication of his intentions, there is strong evidence to suggest that the *All-Night Vigil* is a concert rather than a liturgical work. Instead of composing music for the entire service (as he had done in his *Liturgy*), Rachmaninov set fifteen ordinary (unchanging) hymns from the Vigil service, dispensing with the liturgical minutiae. [The exclamations for deacon and priest you will hear at the beginning of the performance are not part of Rachmaninov's score].

The architecture of the work reveals the secure hand of a mature composer – by the time the *All-Night Vigil* was written, Rachmaninov had already produced his *Second* and *Third Piano Concertos* and *Second Symphony*. The Orthodox authorities specified that certain of the hymns should be set using the church chants (the ancient *znamenny* melodies, along with the more recent Greek and Kiev chants). Rachmaninov included the prescribed chants in his Vigil, but also composed new chants for the remaining movements, "conscious counterfeits" that are indistinguishable from real chants by all except specialists. It is this consistent use of chant as a basis that unifies the *All-Night Vigil* as a cycle. However, Rachmaninov had a deeper stylistic affinity with chant: "Already beginning with the *First Symphony*, his works constantly abound with melodic turns resembling *znamenny* chant, which became organic and integral elements of his own musical language." One example is the opening of No. 10 from the *All-Night Vigil*, a newly-composed 'chant' which strongly resembles the initial melody of the *Third Piano Concerto* (brought into prominence by the film *Shine*). Rachmaninov also had a life-long fascination with the Latin *Dies Irae* chant.

One of the Vigil's most obvious and attractive features is its very Russianness, "a monumental epic canvas, worthily continuing the nationalistic traditions of the Mighty Five." The composition of the *All-Night Vigil* in the midst of World War One was in part an act of patriotism; the old church chants it contained were for Rachmaninov the embodiment of the Russian soul. The most characteristic sonorities of a Russian choir are a result of the low voices, in particular the basses. There are many examples throughout the Vigil, but the most graphic is the bass descent to a subterranean low B flat at the end of No. 5: "I knew the voices of my countrymen, and I well knew the demands I could make upon Russian basses!"

The *All-Night Vigil* can be appreciated as a choral symphony. The use of instruments is forbidden in the Orthodox Church, so all singing is of necessity unaccompanied. This restriction led composers to expand and develop the expressive power of the choir using orchestral techniques – registral and dynamic extremes, contrasts in texture, etc. Colouristic devices employed by Rachmaninov include humming (which incidentally would be frowned upon by the Orthodox authorities, since removing the text converts the singing voice into an instrument) and the onomatopoeic sound of bells in Nos. 7 and 12. While orchestral in scope, this is not to say that the text of the *All-Night Vigil* is unimportant. On the contrary, Rachmaninov's music is always responsive to the smallest nuances in the text, which encapsulates the central themes of the Christian faith. While some of the texts are unfamiliar, many are well known in the Western Church: Nunc Dimittis (No. 5), Ave Maria (6), Magnificat (11), Gloria and Te Deum (12).

When discussing modern music in an interview, Rachmaninov observed of contemporary composers, "They have not the capacity to make their works 'exult,' as Hans von Bülow called it. They mediate, protest, analyze, reason, calculate, and brood – but they do not exult." The *All-Night Vigil* 'exults' – this is as good a reason as any for its popularity, with believer and non-believer alike.