

PROGRAM NOTE

It's not like skipping to the last chapter of a novel "to see how it turns out," or like turning to the back of a textbook to look at the answers, but if you go to the last line of the final movement of this monumental work you'll get an insight into its poetic and religious character. This fifteenth movement is a hymn of thanksgiving to Mary, the Mother of God. It concludes:

"Rejoice, O unwedded Bride!"

These few words are an insightful condensation of theology – our human effort to study and understand the nature of God. Here, the woman who bore the Son of God is told to be happy even though she has not yet fulfilled her earthly destiny. Mary "represents" us. We all have these religious blessings: victory from the grave, forgiveness of sin, peace, goodwill, the commandments. In short, we have salvation. But we still face calamities; we are still unfulfilled. Yet we go on singing; sometimes we sing all night long!

In this last movement, and in the sixth and eleventh movements, Mary is called "Theotokos," an expression from the Eastern Orthodox tradition that is as familiar to them as "Mother of God" is to us. It literally means "Bearer of God." The single word joins together the divine and the human nature of Mary. She is the "unwedded Bride" who gave birth to the Son of God. She is both like us, and holier than we are. We feel this especially in this historic chapel built, dedicated, and used in her honor: the Chapel of Mary of the Angels.

After starting with the very last line of the fifteen songs of thanksgiving that comprise *The All-Night Vigil*, make sure you go on to read them all. They are time-honored texts (many with time-honored melodies) from the Russian Orthodox tradition of beginning the celebration of Easter as early as possible. Collectively, they are a "walk through the Bible," including notable stops at the Psalms and some "old, favorite" hymns and doxologies. Even though they are sung in the ancient, liturgical language of the Russian Orthodox church, you'll find most of them very familiar. Some of them you may know by heart, such as the *Nunc Dimittis*, which Simeon sings to Mary, Joseph and Jesus in

chapter two of the Gospel of Luke; and the *Magnificat*, which Mary sings to the Lord God in the first chapter of Luke. You'll also find the Russian Orthodox version of the devotional prayer to Mary which we call the *Hail Mary*.

And now for some background to place this timeless work in its time:

Sergei Rachmaninoff was just over 40 years old when he composed his version of the *All-Night Vigil*. (Other Russian composers have written their *Vigils*, with the most notable one being by Tchaikovsky.) Rachmaninoff completed his in 1915. The first performances were benefit concerts for families of soldiers killed or wounded in World War I, which had begun the previous August. The location was not a church, but a large concert hall in Moscow. The choir was comprised of the best singers from "The Moscow Synodal School of Church Singing." The piece was acclaimed from the start.

In his memoirs, the well-known Russian singer, Alexander Smirnov, wrote the following first-hand description of the initial reception of the *All-Night Vigil*:

The task of singing this new work evoked a sense of joy among us singers and on the part of our conductor, Nikolai Danilin. This was due, in no small measure, to the fact that we all read the dedication on the first page: "To S.V. Smolensky." This name was sacred to the Synodal Choir and School. We began to rehearse with a sense of emotion. I still recall how Danilin played it through twice for us on the piano, while making such comments as, "Listen to this part one more time!" and, "This movement only appears to be difficult when I play it on the piano. But for the choir, it will be easy."

And I remember how, despite the rule that prohibited applause at performances of sacred music, after the last chord of the Vigil, the audience burst into a tumultuous ovation. Rachmaninoff himself came out on stage and gathered up a twig of white lilac for himself.

The Russian composer, Alexander Kastalsky (1856-1926) wrote these enthusiastic words in a review of the premier performances:

Everyone should hear what has become of our simple, straightforward chants when in the hands of a major artist! The composer displays a loving and careful attitude toward our ancient ecclesiastic melodies.

And another reviewer praised this religious work as being “popular” – in the root meaning of the word:

Perhaps never before has Rachmaninoff approached so close to the people – to their style, to their soul – as in this work. And perhaps this work in particular heralds a broadening of his creative flight, a conquest of new dimensions of the spirit, and, hence a genuine evolution of his powerful talent.

In his own memoirs, Rachmaninoff wrote about his 1915 *All-Night Vigil*. He recalled playing his piano reduction of it for Nikolai Danilin, the conductor of the choir that first sang it:

My favorite number in the work is the 5th movement, the canticle, “Lord, now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace.” I should like this sung at my funeral. Towards the end there is a passage sung by the basses – a scale descending to the lowest B-flat in a very slow pianissimo. After I played the passage, Danilin shook his head, saying, “Now where on earth are we to find such basses? They are as rare as asparagus at Christmas!” Nevertheless, he did find them. I knew the voices of my countrymen, and I well knew the demands I could make upon Russian basses!

There is no way to sum up the intellectual artistry and the emotional influence of Rachmaninoff’s music here. But in the current issue of *Take Note*, the newsletter of the Chamber Chorale, bass Dave Gustafson comes pretty close:

The music itself, through clear harmonic structure and contrasts of sound and dynamics, conveys in its beauty much of the spectrum of human emotion: from sorrow and grief to joy; from love, tenderness and amazement to awe and wonder – and all of it using only skillfully coordinated human voices.

Almost exactly 100 years ago, Rachmaninoff and his family left Russia never to return. This was shortly after the start of the Russian Revolution in October 1917. He went first to Finland, then stayed for a period in Denmark. He emigrated to America in November 1918 and settled in New York City where he lived for some twenty-three years until his doctor strongly suggested he move to a warmer climate. So like Igor Stravinsky and other Russian artists, he went to California. But he was already suffering from the cancer that would take his life. He died in Beverly Hills on March 28, 1943.

His wish to have the 5th movement of his *All-Night Vigil* sung at his funeral was fulfilled only in part, as there was yet no published Russian version of the complete work. And his wish to be buried on family property in Switzerland was thwarted by the Second World War. So his body was brought from California to the Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, a suburb of New York City. His wife (and first cousin) Natalya would join him there in 1951.

On a happier but still posthumous note, a church in Moscow has made it a tradition to perform the *All-Night Vigil* every year on the evening before April 2nd – which is the “vigil” before the composer’s birthday.

– Program note by Rev. Donald Fox, with much help from Prof. Jim Wheat’s note published for the Chamber Chorale’s January 1999 performance of the All-Night Vigil.