



WASO Chorus Sings

Vespers

Sun 22 September 2pm | St Mary's Cathedral, Perth

RACHMANINOV *All-Night Vigil (Vespers)*

Andrew Foote conductor

Courtney Pitman mezzo soprano

Tom Buckmaster tenor

WASO Chorus

SOPRANO

Valerie Bannan
Alinta Carroll
Clara Connor
Charmaine de Witt
Fay Edwards
Bronwyn Elliott
Kath Goodman
Lesley Goodwin
Sue Hingston
Michelle John
Elena Mavrofridis
Elizabeth Reid
Lucy Sheppard
Sarah Shneier
Nike Titilola Etim
Carol Unkovich

Marjan van Gulik
Alicia Walter
Margo Warburton

ALTO

Janet Baxter
Llewela Benn
Patsy Brown
Sue Coleson
Jeanette Collins
Catherine Dunn
Kaye Fairbairn
Jenny Fay
Dianne Graves
Louise Hayes
Mathilda Joubert
Kate Lewis

Diana MacCallum
Lynne Naylor
Philomena Nulsen
Deborah Pearson
Deborah Piesse
Fiona Robson
Neb Ryland
Olga Ward
Jacquie Wright

TENOR

John Beamish
David Collings
Matthew Flood
Ken Gasmier
Allan Griffiths
Patrick Melling

John Murphy
Jay Reso
Chris Ryland
Simon Taylor
Arthur Tideswell
Stephen Turley
Brad Wake

BASS

Justin Audcent
Michael Berkeley-Hill
Paul Brayshaw
Charlie Bond
Bertel Bulten
Tony Errington
Mark Gummer
Benjamin Lee

Tony Marrion
Mark Richardson
Steve Sherwood
Chris Smith
Robert Turnbull
Mark Wiklund
Andrew Wong

Program Notes

All-Night Vigil, Op.37

Sergei Rachmaninov
(1873 - 1943)

1. *Priidite, poklonimsya* (Come, let us worship)
2. *Blagoslovi, dushe moya, Gospoda* (Bless the Lord, O my soul)
3. *Blazhen muzh* (Blessed is the man)
4. *Svete tikhyy* (Gladsome light)
5. *Nine otpushchayeshi* (Canticle of Simeon)
6. *Bogoroditse Devo* (Troparion for the Virgin Mary)
7. *Shestopsalmie* (Intonation to the Hexapsalm)
8. *Khvalite imya Gospodne* (Polyeleopsalm)
9. *Blagosloven yesi, Gospodi* (Troparia of the Resurrection)
10. *Voskresenie Khristovo videvshe* (Having beheld the Resurrection)
11. *Velichit dusha moya Gospoda* (Hymn of thanksgiving to the Mother of God)
12. *Slavoslovie velikoe* (The Great Doxology)
13. *Tropar': Dnes' spasenie* (Troparion of the Resurrection I)
14. *Tropar': Voskres iz groba* (Troparion of the Resurrection II)
15. *Vzbrannoy voyevode* (Kontakion for the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary)

Rachmaninov's setting of the *All-Night Vigil* is one of the great masterworks of the choral repertoire. Unlike western Europe with its oratorios and especially England, with its Anglican cathedral tradition, Russia's church music heritage was not particularly inspiring. There was a vast body of chant dating back to the 10th century, but the conservatism of the Orthodox liturgy had effectively fossilised this as unaccompanied, unison singing. Attempts in the 17th century to reform the musical practices of the church had met with a backlash so violent that in the end the ancient chants were banned altogether. The music that took their place was heavily influenced by the Italian school, à la Mozart or Haydn. When composers in the 19th century began to reassert their national identity by reclaiming authentic Russian chants, having no living performance practice to draw on, they generally ended up squeezing the melodies into the regular rhythms and simple four-part harmonies of the West. Rachmaninov, with his *All-Night Vigil*, was the first to successfully blend old and new, remaining faithful to the old melodies while creating a newly expressive musical soil in which they could thrive.

The *All-Night Vigil*, despite the name, does not last all through the night in the Russian Orthodox tradition, at least not in ordinary parish worship; it is the standard Saturday evening service, combining the offices of Vespers, Matins and the First Hour – a prayerful farewell to the day that is done, and a preparation for the day to come. Rachmaninov's setting consists of 15 musical items. Ten of these use traditional chants; the other five (Nos 1, 3, 6, 10 and 11) are pure Rachmaninov, but so skilfully constructed that it is really not possible to pick them as 'false' just by listening to them.

Russian chant differs from the Gregorian chant of the Western church most obviously in its rhythmic patterning: whereas in Gregorian chant the notes are generally all the same length and flow evenly, with no sense of any regular metre or pulse, in Russian chant the rhythm is notated, and the notes have different lengths. The rhythms are still 'free', though, in the sense that they don't fit neatly into bars of regular length, and in fact the music generally has no bar-lines at all, except at the ends of phrases. The melodies tend to move in steps rather than leaps, and are confined to quite a limited range of pitches, usually no more than a sixth; in No.4, *Svete tikhyy*, the tune covers just four notes.

What Rachmaninov does with these melodies is extraordinary. Using the natural timbres of each voice type, he creates a breathtaking range of vocal and choral colours, contrasting high and low voices (sopranos and altos against tenors and basses), upper and lower voices (sopranos and tenors against altos and basses), solo voices and full chorus. Overlaid on this rich colour palette are the shifting harmonic textures: from homophony, with the voices all moving together in rhythmic unison (the first movement, *Priidite, poklonimsya*, for example), to the freer polyphony of, say, No.7, *Slava v vishnikh Bogu*, where different vocal lines move at different speeds, and bell-like chords ring out over the melody. And although the melodies themselves are at times quite repetitive, Rachmaninov never repeats his harmonies: they are different every time.

Then there is a third layer of colour in the constantly changing dynamics. Of course, the power of the full choir is always impressive, but even more striking is Rachmaninov's use of the softer dynamics: *piano*, *pianissimo* and beyond, into near silence. The closing phrase of No.5, *Nine otpushchayeshi*, where the bass line descends right down to a bottom B flat, is all the more breathtaking for being sung in a whisper.

Rachmaninov never heard the *Vigil* performed liturgically: it was premiered on 10 March 1915 at a war benefit concert, albeit by a church choir, the all-male Moscow Synodal Choir, with a boy treble as the alto soloist. Even in the concert hall, however, the effect of Rachmaninov's kaleidoscope of colours and textures is the same as that of the original, unadorned chant: a heightening of the meaning of the sacred texts, and a spirit of awe and wonder.

Abridged from a note by Natalie Shea © 2014

This is the first performance of Rachmaninov's All-Night Vigil by the West Australian Symphony Orchestra Chorus.