



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF MUSIC

Rachmaninoff Vespers - Slavic Chants

Music by Sergei Rachmaninoff

Steven Fox, *conductor*

Christopher Bagan and Daniel Taylor, *directors*

The Clarion Choir

with Mikki Sodergren, *alto soloist*

John Ramseyer, *tenor soloist*

and University of Toronto Schola Cantorum and
Members of the Choir of the Theatre of Early Music

Friday, February 28, 2020 at 7:30 pm

St. Anne's Anglican Church, 270 Gladstone Avenue

The Historical Performance concerts are made possible in part by a generous gift from Ethel Harris.

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

ARTISTS

Steven Fox, *conductor*

Christopher Bagan and Daniel Taylor, *directors*

Mikki Sodergren, *alto soloist*

John Ramseyer, *tenor soloist*

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PROGRAM NOTES

The *All-Night Vigil* or *Vespers* is widely regarded as Sergei Rachmaninoff's greatest choral masterpiece. It is a lush and transcendent setting of traditional texts from the canonical hours of the Russian Orthodox Church. Written for choir with alto and tenor soloists (here, **Mikki Sodergren** and **John Ramseyer**), its magnificent, soaring movements derive from ancient Kievan and Byzantine chants, many of which are presented in this concert together with Rachmaninoff's settings. Traditionally, an all-night vigil is celebrated on the eve of the main feasts of the Orthodox Church. Originally beginning at 6:00 in the evening and concluding at 9:00 the following morning, it comprises three separate services: Great Vespers, Matins (at midnight), and the First Hour or Prime (in the morning). By the end of the 19th century, the service had been reduced to a mere three hours. Concert performances are further shortened by the omission of the traditional prayers.

The vigil uses the beauty of the setting sun as an analogy to inspire contemplation of the spiritual light of Christ, the light of the coming day, and the eternal light of the heavenly kingdom, as well as the particulars of the approaching feast day. Great Vespers begins in silence, with a cruciform censing of the altar; one of the most profound moments of Orthodox liturgy, representing

both the silence before Creation and eternal rest. There follows a sequence of hymns, readings, chants and prayers, providing a narrative of the reconciliation between God and man through the redeeming sacrifice of Christ. Music, of course, is a powerful vehicle for the sacred texts. Not surprisingly, the austere, ancient foundational chants underscore the primacy of the words, and even in Rachmaninoff's moving and expressive scoring, the words still remain paramount. Rachmaninoff's setting of the All-Night Vigil (*Vsenoshchnoye bdeniye*, Op. 37) was written in January and February 1915 in the middle of World War I, when he was 41. During this period, Rachmaninoff was traveling throughout Russia with Serge Koussevitsky, giving concerts in aid of the war against Germany. He had already completed his Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom in 1910 (following Tchaikovsky's example of 1879) but the Vigil is more elaborate and intense in its expression. He used authentic Znamenny chant in seven movements; Greek chants in two; and in the remaining movements he constructed what he described as a counterfeit of the original.

The piece is dedicated to the scholar Stephan Vassilovich Smolensky (1849-1909), who had introduced Rachmaninoff to the repertoire of the church when he was at the Moscow Conservatory. Yet, Rachmaninoff's inspiration was

as much politically motivated as anything else; a powerful affirmation of Russian nationalism during the war. The first performance on March 10, 1915, was given not liturgically, but in a fund-raising concert by the Moscow Synodal Choir, directed by Nicolai Danilin. It was extremely well received and had to be repeated four times that season.

“Even in my dreams I could not have imagined that I would write such a work,” Rachmaninoff told the singers at the first performance. Hearing this extraordinary piece of music, not a frozen edifice of austere musical architecture but a vibrant and powerfully emotional manifestation of religious experience, it is certainly possible to understand precisely how he felt.

Vespers

1. The work begins with the word Amin (Amen) responding to the Great Litany, which would have been chanted by the priest. Then there is a robust fourfold call to prayer, in six and then eight parts, emphasizing the sovereignty of Christ.

2. A truncated version of Psalm 103 (104)*, in which the alto soloist sings the melody based on Greek chant against alternating backgrounds of tenor and bass, and soprano and alto. Tender and deeply reverential, this psalm is sung as the church is censed.

3. This homiletic text comes from Psalm 1, with verses sung predominantly by middle voices, and refrains of Alleluia by the full choir. Beginning simply and devoutly, it grows in strength, erupts in a Gloria of great conviction, then recedes into reverence.

4. The Phos Hilaron is one of the most ancient hymns of the Orthodox Church. The text is from Psalm 140 (141). Here, the melody is a Kiev chant using only four notes. The dramatic image of the darkness approaching the setting sun is marked by the entrance of the lowest basses with more shadows collecting as higher basses enter. But then the tone changes to shimmering candlelight rising behind the tenor's solo of praise, reflecting the gradual lighting of the candles by the priest and deacon.

5. The Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32) is the prayer of the elderly Simeon who had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. Here, against a gently rocking background, the tenor solo sings a Kiev chant expressing Simeon's gratitude for God's blessing. At the end of the movement the basses descend, step by step, to a low B-flat, in what is one of the most impressive passages in choral music. Rachmaninoff was particularly fond of this movement and wanted it at his funeral, but this wish was not granted because no place could be

found for it in the funeral service.

6. The last movement of the Vespers section is an Ave Maria. Beginning in hushed and transcendent veneration, it soon begins to gain urgency and ultimately blossoms in a powerful assertion of salvation. After this all the lights are dimmed and the doors to the Holy of Holies are closed.

Matins

7. The start of Matins is a chorus in praise of God, preceding the reading of the Six Psalms, which express a sense of loss and separation from God. This setting is full of the sound of bells as the word Slava (Glory) is reiterated.

8. Called the Polyeleos (expressing “much mercy”), this movement celebrates the reconciliation between God and man with texts from Psalm 135 (136). Rachmaninoff uses a znamenny chant in octaves for altos and basses, marking the music *spiritoso* to celebrate God’s steadfast mercy.

9. The Evlogitaria is a series of stanzas referencing the Credal assertion that Jesus descended to the dead, and revisiting the Resurrection from the perspectives of all four Gospels. All are framed between chants of the text, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord; teach me Thy statutes.” Presenting the ringing sound of angel choirs in verse 1, and the mournful women

and the angel in verses 2 through 4, the movement ends with a driving Gloria setting (*Slava otu i sinu*), which Rachmaninoff later incorporated into his *Symphonic Dances*.

10. After a Gospel reading, the book is brought out for the people to kiss. This is Rachmaninoff’s own chant, using wide contrasts of register and dynamics, and praising and claiming the Christ who brought salvation through His death and resurrection.

11. The Magnificat is traditionally set for soprano voices to lend realism to Mary’s response to the Ave Maria. However, Rachmaninoff gives his Magnificat to the lowest of the basses, who quote her words with great effect! The text from Luke alternates with an antiphon.

12. The Great Doxology is the climax of Matins, and in a true all-night vigil it would coincide with the sunrise. Rachmaninoff’s setting begins with the znamenny chant heard in the seventh movement. Beginning with the Gloria, which ends with the effect of chiming bells, the movement proceeds into texts from Psalms and the Apocrypha, changing their character rhythmically and harmonically with each new section.

13 and 14. These two Resurrection hymns are not both sung in one service: they alternate according

to the prevailing tone of the chant for that week. Both are based on znamenny chants. The first has a cold crystalline brilliance that rises to its peak at the mention of the priceless victory given to mankind through the Resurrection. The second is slightly longer, warmer and richer harmonically, and set with infinite tenderness.

First Hour

15. The Vigil changes color dramatically as if the morning

sunlight bursts into the room. Its last movement is another hymn to the Virgin, brilliantly scored and alive with celebration.

*The first number refers to the Psalm as numbered in the Greek and Latin Bibles; the second number refers to the same Psalm as numbered in the Hebrew and Protestant Bibles.

Program notes by Barbara Mouk and Louis Burkot.

BIOGRAPHIES

One of the country's leading professional vocal ensembles, **The Clarion Choir** has performed on some of the greatest stages of North America and Europe. The group was featured on PBS's NYC-Arts program in 2014, and their debut recording, released August 2016, received a Grammy nomination for Best Choral Performance, a nomination for the *BBC Music Magazine* Choral Award in England, and '5 Diapasons' in *Diapason* in France. The Clarion Choir's second album, Kastalsky's *Memory Eternal*, released in August 2018, was awarded Gramophone Editor's Choice and Editor's Choice in *AllMusic*. This recording also received a Grammy nomination for Best Choral Performance, Five Stars for Performance and Five Stars for Production from *BBC Music Magazine*, and was named Recording of the Month on *MusicWeb International*. The

Choir's Lincoln Center debut at the 2011 White Light Festival was described by *The Wall Street Journal* as 'superb...the choristers sang with purity of tone and ensemble precision.' In 2014, the choir gave the New York premiere of *Passion Week* by Maximilian Steinberg, praised as 'a stunning performance' by *The New York Times*. In October 2016, the Choir premiered this same work in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where it was written in 1923, and in London. The Russian premiere, made possible by the United States Department of State, was hailed on Russian television (Vesti Rossiya 24) as 'one of the best examples of cooperation between our countries'; and the London performance at the Royal Academy of Music was called 'a beautiful UK premiere... expertly paced by the conductor Steven Fox, the singing was fluid and full of light and

shade' by *The Times* (UK). In the spring of 2018 The Clarion Choir, together with brass players from The Clarion Orchestra, performed their third Renaissance program as part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Met Live Arts program in the Medieval Sculpture Hall of the Museum. On May 7, 2018, the choir performed with Madonna at the Met Gala in a three-song set that included the world premiere of her new song 'Dark Ballet.' In its 2018-2019 season, The Clarion Choir performed on tour in ten cities, firstly in Kansas City and Washington, DC, with Maestro Leonard Slatkin, and The Orchestra of St. Luke's in the fall, at the University of Toronto in March, and with The English Concert and Maestro Harry Bicket in seven European and American capitals in April. The tour with the English Concert included Clarion's critically acclaimed debut on the main stage of Carnegie Hall.

Conductor **Steven Fox** is Artistic Director of The Clarion Choir and The Clarion Orchestra, and is the newly appointed Music Director of the Cathedral Choral Society at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. He founded Musica Antiqua St. Petersburg as Russia's first period-instrument orchestra at the age of 21, and from 2008 to 2013 he was an Associate Conductor at New York City Opera. He has also served as Assistant Conductor for the Metropolitan Opera Lindemann Young Artists

Program and for Juilliard Opera. He has appeared as a guest conductor with many renowned ensembles such as Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra in San Francisco, Handel and Haydn Society in Boston, Juilliard415 at Lincoln Center, the Charleston Symphony Orchestra, the Quebec Symphony Orchestra, Opéra de Québec, Music of the Baroque in Chicago and the Tucson Symphony Orchestra. In the 2019-2020 season he makes his conducting debut with The Rochester Philharmonic, at the University of Toronto, and with Cappella Romana in Portland and Seattle. His performances have also taken him to some of the most prestigious halls internationally, such as the Grand Philharmonic Hall and Hermitage Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, the Rachmaninoff Hall in Moscow, the Duke's Hall of London, and the Vatican.

He has been called 'an esteemed director' by *The New Yorker* and 'visionary' by *BBC Music Magazine*. Of a recent Clarion performance, *The New York Times* praised his 'deft guidance' and wrote: 'an inspired interpretation. Mr. Fox revealed the drama of the score with vivid dynamic shadings. Intonation and pacing were exemplary throughout the performance.' In 2017, Steven and The Clarion Orchestra mounted the organization's first fully-staged opera production, Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The production, staged by

renowned Canadian director Alain Gauthier, was called 'a deft reach across two centuries' by *The New York Times* and 'a delight, on all fronts' by *Opera* magazine (UK). Steven was named an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music, London, in 2010 'for significant contributions to his field in music,' and has received GRAMMY nominations for his first two recordings with The Clarion Choir: Steinberg's *Passion Week* (2016) and Kastalsky's *Memory Eternal* (2018). In May 2018, Steven conducted The Clarion Choir in a performance with Madonna at the Met Gala, including the world premiere of 'Dark Ballet'. He has given master classes and clinics at The Royal Academy of Music, Dartmouth College, The Juilliard School and Yale University, where he served for two years as preparatory conductor of the Yale Schola Cantorum.

Mezzo-soprano **Mikki Sodergren's** musical flexibility has afforded her many diverse, musical experiences. Recently, she curated programming and performed with baritone Michael Maliakel, and recent New York Philharmonic Assistant Conductor, Joshua Gersen, in Tallahassee Symphony's *Star Crossed Lovers*. The same weekend, she performed as the mezzo-soprano soloist in Haydn's *Harmoniemesse*, under the baton of Steven Fox at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

Mikki has performed Pops programs with the symphonies of Jacksonville, Tallahassee, Savannah, and the New Jersey Festival Orchestra. In the spring of 2019, Mikki toured Europe and the US with the twice-Grammy-nominated Clarion Choir and the English Concert, performing Handel's *Semele* under Harry Bicket. She recently made her Carnegie Hall debut as the female soloist in Dan Forrest's *Requiem for the Living*. She has performed the eponymous role of *Carmen* with Queens Opera Theatre, Aldonza/Dulcinea (*Man of La Mancha*) alongside Ron Raines at Amarillo Opera (TX), and has been in development of several new musicals, including work for Disney Theatricals and The National Theatre of Great Britain. Mikki has performed as the alto soloist in Handel's *Messiah* with the Johnstown Symphony (PA), the mezzo-soprano soloist in the Rachmaninoff *Vespers* with The Clarion Choir and Steven Fox, and the mezzo-soprano soloist in Vivaldi's *Gloria* with Pro Arte Chorale, and with the period ensemble REBEL. She currently serves as the Artistic Director of the American Traditions Vocal Competition in Savannah, Georgia, where all styles of American music are celebrated equally. Mikki Sodergren is a proud alumnus of BUTI and Interlochen Arts Academy.

Known for his “silky, warm tone,” American tenor **John Ramseyer** is a sought-after operatic, concert, and choral singer. Well-versed in operatic repertoire spanning the musical eras, roles include Bill (*Dove’s Flight*), Aeneas (*Dido and Aeneas*), Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*), Fenton (*Sir John in Love*), Lysander (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), Fenton (*Falstaff*), and Chanon (Mandelbaum’s *The Dybbuk*). John has performed leading roles with The Bronx Opera Company, Resonanz Opera, LoftOpera, Apotheosis Opera, Christman Opera Company, The Midwest Institute of Opera, and others. This past April, he toured Europe and the US with Clarion Choir and The English Concert in a concert version of *Semele*, concluding with a performance at Carnegie Hall. Most recently, he was the tenor soloist in Handel’s *Messiah* with Camerata New York. He is currently a member of the Saint Thomas Choir of Men and Boys, where he has collaborated with Baroque Incorporated and Orchestra of St. Luke’s. John Ramseyer is a graduate of Mannes School of Music and an Encouragement Award winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Competition.

The **University of Toronto Schola Cantorum** aims to present the brilliant early choral and instrumental repertoire from across the centuries to a new audience. The group’s interpretations

strive to recreate the original performances of musical works — interpretations led by the energy and insights of the gifted students themselves — in the belief that historical performance ideals and knowledge of the old world are essential for creating music anew. The Schola Cantorum includes students from all levels of study (bachelor in music, master in music and doctoral candidates), with students representing many voice studios in the Faculty. Canada has many university choral ensembles, however the Schola Cantorum is the only large-scale group using period instruments and historically informed performance practices to reveal the beauty of Baroque and early repertoire. In 2012, the Schola Cantorum made its inaugural performance with the famed Tallis Scholars. The ensemble also performed and toured central Canada presenting Handel’s *Coronation Anthems* and recorded early German works including Buxtehude’s *Jesu meines Lebens Leben*. The ensemble also appeared in concert touring with the Gabrieli Consort, presented Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* on four evenings to capacity audiences, offered a reenactment of the coronation ceremony of King George II and made their debut at the Stratford Summer Music Festival. The group presented Heinrich Schütz’s three movement *Musikalische Exequien* in concert, accompanied by the Theatre of Early Music orchestra.

Christopher Bagan is a versatile artist, equally at home on modern and historical keyboard instruments. He is in high demand as a collaborator, chamber musician and basso-continuo specialist. He has performed with many of the leading baroque singers, instrumentalists and conductors in North America and abroad. Christopher is particularly active in the field of baroque opera, working as the assistant conductor at Opera Atelier and as coach and répétiteur at the Canadian Opera Company. In 2015-16 Christopher was the Early Keyboard instructor at Case Western Reserve University and the head of Harpsichord at the Cleveland Institute of Music. He is currently on faculty at the University of Toronto, working with the students in the Historical Performance program.

A Sony Classical artist, conductor/ countertenor **Daniel Taylor** is sought after for his portrayals on the opera and concert stage, on CD/DVD and in film. Appearing on more than 120 recordings, his projects have been recognized by a Grammy as well as with the Juno, Opus and ADISQ prizes. Daniel has appeared at Glyndebourne, Rome Opera, Welsh National, Canadian Opera, Opera North, in Munich and at the New York Metropolitan Opera. He has joined leading orchestras including the San Francisco, Los Angeles, St. Louis, London, Lisbon, Cleveland, the New York Philharmonic,

Gothenburg, Scottish National. Daniel has performed for Canadian Prime Ministers, for the Queen of England, for the King and Queen of Sweden and for the King and Queen of Spain; he recently sang at the investiture ceremony of Her Excellency Governor General of Canada Julie Payette at the Senate's Red Chamber for an estimated audience of 5 million. His devotion to sacred music has been recognized by the award of the Queen's Jubilee Medal. Daniel has appeared with the Dhlai Lama, Salman Rushdie, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Dame Emma Kirkby, Jonathan Miller, Cecilia Bartoli, Joyce Didonato and Gerald Finley, as well as actors Ralph Fiennes, Jeremy Irons, Malcolm McDowell and Chris Noth. Daniel Taylor was recently named Head Vocal Consultant and Chorus Master at the Opera Atelier, and is Head of Historical Performance and Associate Professor, Early Music, Opera and Voice Studies, at the University of Toronto.

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