

“Rachmaninoff's Vespers (All-Night Vigil)”-- Robert Shaw Festival Singers (1990)

Added to the National Registry: 2016

Essay by Joseph Swain (guest post)*



Robert Shaw



Sergei Rachmaninoff

“In Robert Shaw I have at last found the maestro I have been looking for,” said Arturo Toscanini, and so nominated the most influential American choral conductor of the latter half of the 20th century. Shaw, who lived from April 30, 1916 to January 25, 1999, first made his mark by founding an interracial chorus called the Collegiate Chorale in 1941, which joined with Toscanini to perform Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in 1948. That same year, he founded the Robert Shaw Chorale, chosen by the US State Department in 1964 for a good will tour of 15 countries. Best known in recent times is his leadership of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra from 1967 to 1988 and his founding of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus in 1970. Together, the two ensembles made Shaw’s most signal recordings of great works in the choral repertory.

Upon his retirement in 1988, Shaw wished to continue to advance choral singing in America, and so founded the Robert Shaw Choral Institute. Although home was in Columbus, Ohio, the Institute sponsored a three-week summer festival in Quercy, France, for experienced American choral singers, teachers, and directors. The competition for admission was severe, not only because the Institute provided all expenses for participants, but because participation meant an intense choral tutorial with Robert Shaw. Great churches in southwestern France provided concert venues, and this recording of the Rachmaninoff “Vespers (All-Night Vigil)” is the fruit of the 1989 festival.

Lovers of the extreme and virtuosic Romanticism of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s works for solo piano and piano concertos could be forgiven for failing to recognize this piece as music by the same composer, so strange must it sound to them. There is no piano and no orchestra, only an unaccompanied chorus. A most conservative melodic technique restrains even the most prominent of melodies and Rachmaninoff’s chromatic ventures in harmony are almost entirely gone. Why should he have composed such a work?

“Ever since my childhood I had been attracted by the magnificent melodies of the ‘Oktoechos’ [“eight modes”--the Orthodox tonal system]. I had always felt that a special style was needed for their choral treatment, and this I hoped to have found in the ‘Vesper Mass.’” His interest in new Russian sacred compositions was hardly singular. Inspired by his older colleague Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s own setting of the “All-Night Vigil” (1882) and of the “Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom” (1878), which Rachmaninoff also set, and surely by Modest Mussorgsky’s great opera “Boris Godonov,” the first act of which takes place entirely in a Russian Orthodox monastery with the choir chanting morning prayer in the background, many Russian composers tried their hands at reviving church music during the first two decades of the 20th century. Like them, the necessary incorporation of melodies from the traditions of *znamennīy*, Byzantine, and Kievan chant that some composers might have regarded as too limiting a condition, Rachmaninoff took as a source of rejuvenation. Without any commission to spur him on, he still finished the work of about 65 minutes in a two-week period spanning January and February 1915, and heard its premier on March 10 in Moscow.

But nostalgic feeling for old chants had to meet the technical challenges of composing “modern” church music that satisfied the requirements of Orthodox liturgy. There were many.

One is the obligatory texts of the all-night vigil, a liturgy sung on the eves of Russian holy days. They range from direct Biblical quotations, such as the Canticle of Simeon (“Lord, let Thy servant depart,” No. 5) to quotations that are heavily troped (“My soul magnifies the Lord,” No. 11), to prayers reminiscent of Western devotions (“Rejoice, O Virgin Mother of God,” No. 6, close to “Ave Maria”) to admixtures of hymns and psalms (“Glory to God,” No. 7). Some have refrains, others many repeated “Alleluias.” And they vary greatly in length. Rachmaninoff solves the problem of the longer texts by having the required chant melodies sung rapidly while the accompanying voices move more slowly, the opposite of Western *cantus firmus* practice.

Another challenge is the repetitiveness of those traditional melodies, how to enliven a kind of recitation characteristic of traditional psalmody. Rachmaninoff’s solution is, of course, the counterpoint provided by as many as seven other moving parts, which can have the effect of making every repetition of a chanted formula sound new. Harmonizing Orthodox chant has always been a controversial matter, ever since a schism erupted when Patriarch Nikon imported Western harmonic idioms to accompany the *znamennīy* in the 17th century. This harmony is the sound that will surprise most Rachmaninoff devotees. He denies himself virtually all his Romantic chromatic technique and instrumental flair. His “Vespers” melodies and harmonies together create a musical asceticism.

That asceticism is the essential means to Rachmaninoff’s aim here, for it “solves the problem of Russian Church music.” His aim is not the Romantic one of expressing oneself through music, but rather the much older artistic ideal of faithfulness to liturgical tradition, yet modern, the composition of a music proper for the praise of God.

Then there are the challenges of performance. For a vocal ensemble, there is no greater test than singing *a cappella*, unaccompanied by any instrument, especially in recording. Intonation, balance, and blend must all be flawless; there is no band to lean on for pitch or for cover. In these critical technical matters, Robert Shaw leaves nothing to be desired. The sound is marvelously clean throughout.

That sound of these Robert Shaw Festival Singers might be called “international” by comparison with what is for many the touchstone of all the “All-Night Vigil” recordings, Alexander Sveshnikov conducting the State Russian Choir. That recording is indisputably “Russian,” in the timbres of the voices, particularly the altos and deep, deep basses, and in the way that the onsets of phrases are attacked with a quick pitch slide coming from just under the main note. The performance certainly has spirit and energy, but at the cost of a certain precision of intonation and ensemble. The Shaw recording has these in spades, and yet his sound is completely convincing and expressive in more intimate way. In many of the movements, Rachmaninoff calls for one or more parts of the chorus to sustain very long notes, often not sung but hummed, reminiscent of the Byzantine *ison* drone pitch that often underlies the chants of that tradition. In the Shaw recording, these make a mysterious tonal curtain that colors the background of the main melody. That is one effect among many that gets him what he wants: the sound of Russian Orthodoxy sung by an American choir.

Joseph P. Swain writes music criticism and critical theory and teaches at Colgate University. Recent books include “Listening to Bach and Handel: A Comparative Critique” (Pendragon, 2018) and “Sacred Treasure: Understanding Catholic Liturgical Music” (Liturgical Press, 2012).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.