

Seraphim Singers serve up a worthy, timely performance of Rachmaninoff's "Vigil"

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By Jonathan Blumhofer



The Seraphim Singers performed Rachmaninoff's "All-Night Vigil" Sunday at First Church in Cambridge.

Sometimes titles are deceiving. Sergei Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil*, for instance, only lasts around an hour. But such is the music's scope and aura that its fifteen movements can resonate in the mind far longer than that.

On Sunday, the Seraphim Singers presented the Russian-born composer's 1915 work in a concert at First Church in Cambridge. Presented in conjunction with The Icon Museum and Study Center in Clinton, MA, the afternoon's performance (which was heard via

stream) sought, among other things, to call for “an end to violence in Ukraine and throughout the world.”

Even if this weekend’s effort didn’t lead to the desired result, this is an apt work with which to make a moral point. Rachmaninoff, who loved the music of the Russian Orthodox church from his youth, composed the *Vigil* in the aftermath of the Russian army’s defeat at the Battle of Tannenberg during World War 1. Its first performance was in a concert supporting his country’s efforts against invading German hordes.

Such awareness gave welcome context to Sunday’s performance, which was led by Seraphim music director Eric Christopher Perry and featured an appearance from the a cappella group Renaissance Men. It also underlined the meaningfulness of Rachmaninoff’s stylistic conservatism in this music: in times of sudden, unsettling change, longstanding traditions can take on added value.

The afternoon’s account of the *Vigil* certainly embraced its thick textures and warm sonorities. Though a concert stream isn’t ideal for gauging blend and balances, little details—like the basses’ low Cs in “Bless the Lord, My Soul” and the “Hymn to the Mother of God”—emerged subtly and there was an inviting lift to several of the work’s faster sections. The syncopations in “O Gladsome Light” tripped nicely and the Singers’ brought impressive energy to bear to the lively bits of the “Magnificat” as well as the concluding “Hymn to the Mother of God.”

At the same time, one came away from the performance wishing for a stronger range of dynamic shape to the whole (the distance from pianissimo to fortissimo felt too narrow), sometimes more focused intonation, and tighter coordination between the parts. First Church’s acoustic is lovely but unforgiving, so even small moments that fall out of sync tell, like the slightly askew refrains in “Bless the Lord, O My Soul.”

Nevertheless, Perry and his forces traversed the *Vigil* with a good sense of direction and confidence. Various solos from the choir emerged strongly, led by tenor Fausto Miro's ringing contributions in the "Nunc dimittis."

Interspersed among the *Vigil*'s movements were eight Ukrainian folk songs and chants. Mostly short and all—except one—for solo voice, they fit naturally and sometimes pithily within the larger context. Of particular note were the raw, folksy "God is With Us" and bass Michael Budway's take on the sweet, lyrical "Why are you, girl, so sad?" Meantime, the vocal sextet Renaissance Men took center stage for the folk song "Oh, a duckling swims on the Tysa River," their rendition marked by shapeliness and a cleanly blended tone.

In a particularly thoughtful touch, the Singers and The Icon Museum collaborated to bring several items that were displayed in First Church during the concert. For those watching remotely, those images—paintings of icons, pictures of landscapes and church interiors, and more—filled the screen and the choir, left unseen, functioned as a kind of soundtrack to the visual element. Far from being a distraction, this approach served to emphasize the devotional aspect of Rachmaninoff's writing and its deep ties to a specific place and its cultural practices.

**The Seraphim Singers present "To Look for America" 8 p.m.
May 2 at Trinity Parish in Newton Centre.**