

RACHMANINOV All-Night Vigil (Antonenko)

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In recent years there has been almost an embarrassment of fine recordings of Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil*, better (if erroneously) known as his *Vespers*, which he composed quickly early in 1915. It is scored for mixed, unaccompanied *divisi* voices, and 10 of its 15 movements are based on traditional Russian Orthodox chants, the others by Rachmaninov himself, which he labelled 'conscious counterfeits'.

Where this 2022 recording differs from its rivals is that it features an all-male choir, the PaTRAM Institute Choir, specially assembled, with the music transposed downwards. The venue is also unique: the Russian Orthodox Convent Monastery at the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem. The notion of employing an all-male group was prompted by the fact that the seventh movement, 'Glory to God in the highest', had already been arranged decades earlier by Grechaninov. The remaining movements for this new version have been completed by Benedict Sheehan and Dmitrii Lazarov.

Frankly, the lower tessituras take some getting used to, the resulting timbre being distinctively lugubrious, making the slower movements gloomier and more ponderous. Still, it is a wonderful thing to hear a really characterful *basso profundo*, Alexis Lukianov, as he intones the opening of 'O gladsome light'. He is one of no fewer than eight 'octavists' who underpin the choral body, including the celebrated Glenn Miller. To appreciate this effect best, listen to and marvel at the conclusion of the sixth movement, 'Rejoice, O Virgin'.

The conductor, Ekaterina Antonenko, clearly likes to linger; her slower tempos stretch this performance to 70 minutes. My favourite interpretation remains the 2012 release by the Latvian Radio Choir under Sigvards Klava (Ondine, 2/13), which runs to 62 minutes – a substantial difference. The recorded sound favours the higher basses and lower tenors somewhat. However, the fervour of the singing cannot be faulted. An interesting endeavour, but not a first choice.

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