

Going low: A rare local performance of Rachmaninoff's complete 'All Night Vigil'

Choral music » Piece features multiple choirs and 300 voices, including two basso profundos.

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Composer Sergei Rachmaninoff knew the depths of the Russian soul as well as the low rumble of the Russian male larynx.

In the composer's "All Night Vigil" -- the work is also known as "Vespers" -- he personifies Russian soulfulness by requiring choral basses to sing down to a low B-flat -- five whole steps lower than most basses can sing.

Nikolai Danilin, conductor for the work's 1915 premiere in Moscow, complained that finding such basses would be more difficult than finding "asparagus at Christmas." Rachmaninoff countered that he knew the voices of his countrymen.

The singers were found, and Rachmaninoff's brilliant setting of Russian Orthodox texts was hailed as a masterpiece.

Conductor Brady Allred faced the same deep challenge Danilin did as he prepared Salt Lake Choral Artists and University of Utah choirs to sing the "Vespers" for the opening of the 2010 Madeleine Festival of the Arts and Humanities. But Allred didn't have to go to Russia for the solution.

An old friend of Allred's, Glenn Miller, is a church musician from Michigan with a secondary career as an octavist -- a choral singer specializing in music calling for ultra-low basses, especially the Rachmaninoff "Vespers."

Miller suggested to Allred another basso profundo, Boston-based singer Cameron Beauchamp. The

two octavists will perform alongside Allred's singers this weekend, providing the deep, resonant foundation that underlies Rachmaninoff's glorious harmonies, which are sung without instrumental accompaniment.

Although Russia is known for producing magnificent low basses, such voices can be found among people of all cultures, though they are rare, said Russian-music specialist Vladimir Morosan.

Morosan, a Californian, is the son of Russian immigrants who fled their country during the World War II era. His dual interest in choral music and his own heritage led him to study and collect the Russian music suppressed after the rise of the Soviet Union in 1917 -- including the masterpiece of the genre, Rachmaninoff's "Vespers." His company, Musica Russica, is the worldwide source for Russian choral music recordings, scores and teaching aids.

Morosan will be in Utah this week to coach Allred's choirs in authentic pronunciation and choral technique for the "Vespers" and to give preconcert lectures.

The tradition of a cappella singing in Russia is an ancient one. "The Russian Orthodox church has adhered to the ancient Christian tradition of using no instrumental accompaniment because it is believed that the human voice is the perfect instrument praise God," Morosan said.

Rachmaninoff, a master orchestrator of instruments, adapted his orchestral background into his writing for voices, Morosan said. The composer used a palette of vocal sounds from deepest bass to highest soprano, layering and mixing voice combinations and textures for exciting and unusual choral effects.

Still, it's the music's liturgical connection that lends a special aura of mystery and beauty. "[Russian church music] is about transforming our experience in this world into a glimpse of heaven," Morosan said.

Miller first felt the spiritual impact of the "Vespers" in 1989, when legendary choral conductor Robert Shaw recruited him to provide the low notes for the Robert Shaw Festival Singers' landmark recording of the work.

"There are some moments that just always make me tear up," said Miller of the recording that sparked a resurgence of interest in the long-suppressed work. Memories of Shaw's face shining with transcendent joy during a low-bass crescendo in the work's fifth movement can make that happen, as can the sound of the ethereal soprano entrances near the work's end.

For Miller, being the guy with the big Adam's apple and the astonishing low notes has its lighter moments. An amateur video of Miller showing off his low B-flat for a crowd of choral convention attendees garnered 19,000 hits on YouTube. And that low B-flat wasn't even his lowest note. That would be an F, a full octave lower than the bottom end of the typical bass range.

At another singing convention, friends spoofed Miller during a skit purporting to represent his vocal cords with two long jump-ropes beating s-l-o-w-l-y together to approximate the rattle of Miller's subterranean low range.

Miller said he has devoted his life to developing his musical abilities -- he's an organist and conductor besides being a singer -- but that doesn't explain why he has a freakish number of extra low notes. "It's kind of like wanting to be a basketball player," he said. "It helps if you happen to be 7 feet tall."

Allred is looking forward to a busy and fascinating week as he works with Morosan and more than 300 singers to prepare the "All Night Vigil" for performance. The University of Utah's A Cappella and University Singers will join with Salt Lake Choral Artists' Chamber and Concert Choirs for the concerts.

"I've strategically selected some movements and sections of movements to feature different combinations of the ensembles," Allred said. "I wanted to enhance the experience of the listener by varying the dynamic range and texture."

Performances at the U.'s Libby Gardner Concert Hall will include projected images of Russian icons, churches and landscapes. The performance at the Cathedral of the Madeleine will have visual and aural aspects that could be even more compelling -- the acoustical features and religious murals of the cathedral itself.

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Rachmaninoff's "All Night Vigil"

The work, also known as "Vespers," will be performed three times this week by combined choirs of the Salt Lake Choral Artists and University of Utah under the direction of Brady Allred. Tenor Todd Miller and mezzo-soprano Stina Eberhardt are soloists; octavists Glenn Miller and Cameron Beauchamp will perform with the choir.

When and where » Performances on April 9 and 10 are at 7:30 p.m. in Libby Gardner Concert Hall, 1375 E. Presidents Circle, University of Utah campus, Salt Lake City. Russian-music expert Vladimir Morosan will give a preconcert talk at 6:45 p.m.

When and where » An April 11 performance opens the 2010 Madeleine Festival at the Cathedral of the Madeleine, 331 E. South Temple, Salt Lake City. Morosan will give a pre-concert talk at 7 p.m.; the concert begins at 8.

Tickets » Tickets for the April 9 and 10 concerts are \$7; \$3 for students (plus facility and service charges); at 801-581-7100 or visit www.kingtix.org. The April 11 performance is free, with reservations available at 801-328-8941.

More information » Performances at the U.'s Libby Gardner Concert Hall will include projected images of Russian icons, churches and landscapes. The Cathedral of the Madeleine performance will be enhanced by the acoustical features and religious murals of the building itself.

About 'All Night Vigil'

The work is an a cappella setting of Russian Orthodox texts. The first six of its 15 sections are texts from the canonical hour of Vespers.

Composer » Sergei Rachmaninoff

Premiere » 1915, Moscow

Background » Rachmaninoff used Russian Orthodox chants as inspiration and employed his skill as an orchestrator in layering the voices. He also emphasized the Orthodox tradition of unaccompanied vocal parts layered above a very low bass line. The work was banned after the 1917 Russian Revolution because of its religious content. It developed a large following in the United States after recordings made it accessible in the late 1980s, and has been sung by many of the world's finest choral ensembles.

Have a listen » Watch octavist Glenn Miller showing off his basso profundo low notes in this amateur-shot clip (note: the last 30 seconds are the best), which has attracted 19,000 hits:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=eo_IUP_Jdt0.