



HISTORICAL PERFORMANCE NORMS AND RUSSIAN SACRED MUSIC: THE CASE OF RACHMANINOV'S ALL NIGHT VIGIL

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INTRODUCTION

It is not always obvious how performance norms become established. In the case of Russian sacred music, a tendency to local variations across the vasts of Russia was blunted by the conservatism of the Church, and later directly addressed by publication of books of chant and other liturgical music. Beyond that, choirs with national prominence, such as the Capella (previously the Tsar's choir) in St Petersburg, and the Moscow Synodal Choir (previously the Patriarch's choir), together with eminent conductors (e.g. Aleksandr Arkhangel'sky, Vasily Orlov, Alexandr Kastal'sky, Nikolai Danilin, Pavel Chesnokov), played a role. However, by far the most prominent factor in fixing performance norms was the advent of recordings during the twentieth century. The difficulty here is that throughout much of this time, the Soviet Union proscribed the composition and performance of Russian sacred music. Equally, Western choirs had little exposure to, or experience of, singing this musical genre, and were further limited by unfamiliarity with the Cyrillic alphabet and the Church Slavonic language, and a lack of *oktavists*. The result is that very few works in the Russian sacred music repertoire have yet become available in multiple recordings and amenable to performance analysis.

One exception is Rachmaninov's All-Night Vigil, arguably the most familiar work of Russian sacred music in the West and often known, incorrectly, as his Vespers. This was composed in 1915, just two years before the 1917 October Revolution. After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, performances of the All-Night Vigil were no longer proscribed in former Soviet bloc countries, and Western choirs started to attempt recordings. This allowed Ivan Moody in 2016 to undertake a review of 27 different disc recordings.¹ However, since some of the relevant recordings in this review are no longer easily obtainable, and the advent of the Internet has made numerous other performances available, this comparative study focused on current recordings freely available online.

1 Ivan Moody, "Rachmaninov's All-Night Vigil," *Gramophone*, December (2016): 127

METHODS

YouTube offered the largest number of online performances of Rachmaninov's All-Night Vigil, with 34 distinct performances at time of this study.² Analysis involved the *Magnificat* (section 11), which encompasses substantial variation in dynamics, weight and colour. Singing of the text is led by the basses, with an intervening refrain exalting Mary.³ Recordings were divided arbitrarily into three groups.

1. Group 1: four recordings from the Soviet era (prior to 1991), with the first 'historical' recording, made by Sveshnikov in 1965⁴
2. Group 2: nine performances by Slavic choirs after 1991
3. Group 3: 21 performances by non-Slavic choirs after 1991

Analysis included elapsed time of performance, and subjective assessments of: choir size; quality of singing; weight; balance and coordination; tuning; dynamic range; vocal clarity; and prominence of basses.

RESULTS

The recordings fell into one of two primary patterns or formulations, which were termed for convenience 'concert' and 'chamber'. Concert performances involved larger choirs, weightier singing, prominent *oktavists*, and marked accentuation and dynamics. This was true of the original recording, made by Alexander Sveshnikov and the State Academic Choir of the USSR in 1965⁵. Slavic choirs in Groups 1 and 2 generally followed this formulation. Performances of non-Slavic choirs in Group 3 were much more variable. Some followed the more massive concert formulation. However, many were smaller and gave lighter chamber performances with better balance across the four voice parts, although with rare exceptions the basses were more than adequate even without large numbers of *oktavists*. Other than in the weight of performance, the most obvious variation was in tempo. The slowest performances took 10 -10 ½ minutes. In contrast, the fastest, from some non-Slavic choirs, took a mere 6 – 6 ½ minutes. Across all three groups, the quality of singing was generally better in the professional ensembles, but was not directly related to the size of the ensemble. Vocal clarity was generally good, and pronunciation appeared adequate in most non-Slavic choirs.

DISCUSSION

This study raises several interesting questions. Firstly, what makes a good performance? The availability of a wide variety of recordings from choirs around the world seems to indicate two basic choices. The first is a concert approach, usually with a large number of singers and *oktavists*, and a massive, dramatic rendition of great brilliance. This is the model created in Sveshnikov's original recording, and followed thereafter by most Slavic choirs, and some non-Slavic choirs. The second is a chamber approach, with more nuanced singing and fewer extremes, but with no less emotional impact. As to speed, the very rapid tempi of some non-Slavic performances seemed out of kilter with the traditionally slow, reverential style of Russian Church singing. These faster recordings aside, other chamber recordings offered tempi that are just as slow

2 See Appendix Table

3 "Rachmaninoff Vespers Text and Translations", The Singers. Accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.singersmca.org/vespers>

4 The latter never officially appeared in the USSR, but was released in the West,

5 Moody, "Rachmaninov's All-Night Vigil," 125

as the weightier concert performances. Maintenance of phrasing can be challenging at very slow tempi, and is a traditional strength of Slavic choirs. However, lapses in phrasing were not notable in non-Slavic choirs. Another area in which Slavic choirs would seem to have an advantage is in Church Slavonic, but pronunciation of non-Slavic choirs was adequate, at least to the author's ear.

A second important question is: how are performance norms established? Why has Sveshnikov seemed to establish such an important precedent? Part of the answer may lie in the circumstances of the recording. Sveshnikov conducted a world-class Russian choir, and a large group of *oktavists*. He was a superb conductor who himself sang in the Moscow Synodal choir, before sacred music was effectively shut down by the October Revolution in 1917. We also know that the first performances of this work in 1915 were given in concert in public to raise money for the First World War, rather than in a sacred space as part of the liturgy. In addition, this recording apparently required several takes, and was produced at a time when the Soviet Union was strongly projecting its achievements to the West. That all seems reasonable. However, if Sveshnikov's had been a more nuanced, or even a chamber performance, consistent with what we know of his own singing career, and sung for liturgical purposes, would it still function as such a powerful role model? The answer may depend primarily on the 'prime mover' effect, simply the fact that his recording was the first, and was automatically the most important in shaping ensuing performance norms. If so, his recording might well have been the default model, regardless, at least until something preferable came along.

The introduction and development of recording technology, and now the internet, mean that performances are now no longer evanescent and subject to fallible analysis from memory. Everyone can listen, re-listen and compare performances, and decide what they like, based on objective criteria, and especially on subjective aesthetic and emotional considerations. This study suggests an apparent binary choice for Rachmaninov's All-Night Vigil between a brilliant, muscular concert prototype, and a more nuanced chamber presentation that seems to be emerging among non-Slavic choirs. Which is preferable is naturally a matter of individual choice. It should be noted that a similar debate has occurred in relation to Western sacred music of the Baroque period. Should this involve weighty performances with large choirs, and orchestras with loud, modern instruments? Or would lighter performances with smaller choirs and softer period instruments be preferable?⁶ Many listeners may be more comfortable sticking with the prototypical, concert Russian approach. However, the Magnificat is Mary's canticle, said reflectively by a humble woman, in reverence and thanks for her blessing. Given this and the complexity and musical brilliance of Rachmaninov's score, should we perhaps now be exploring more nuanced performances?⁷

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Moody, Ivan, "Rachmaninov's All-Night Vigil," *Gramophone*, December (2016): 124-129

⁶ As one example, Otto Van Klemperer's recordings of the first movement of Bach's St. Mathew Passion are weighty, and generally last 12 minutes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yojsqLYTnEg>. Compare this with recordings made by Nikolaus Harnoncourt, with a much smaller choir and baroque instruments, which last just 6 ½ minutes - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9ZEtPwMOtU>.

⁷ After this analysis was complete, the author became aware of Ivan Moody's review of available performances for the Gramophone. Although, some of the recordings were different, there was concordance between the two analyses. In addition, although the present study was not primarily concerned with identifying a best buy, this author agrees that the performance by the Latvian Radio Choir, with Sigvards Klāva conducting, is a worthy exemplar of chamber performances of this work.

APPENDIX TABLE (STILL CURRENTLY AVAILABLE)

	Choir	Conductor	Country	Date Posted	URL	
Pre-1991	1	State Academic Russian Choir of the USSR	Alexandr Sveshnikov	Russia	April 1, 2012	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWKA7i_JJ2M
	2	Johann Damascene Choir	Karl Linke	Germany	January 21, 2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xsbui_gjXQY
	3	St. Petersburg Cappella	Vladislav Chernushenko	Russia	March 31, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBYy9TjQ-mc
	4	USSR Ministry of Culture Chamber Choir	Valery Polyansky	Russia	December 5, 2010	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjnM4ujeUPM&index=11&list=PL61F7A648358A3586
Post-1991	1	St Petersburg Chamber Choir	Nikolai Korniev	Russia	December 15, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7I2fm5JTbBk
	2	Bulgarian National Choir	Georgi Robev	Bulgaria	August 10, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iWugP6sYc
Slavic Countries	3	Male Choir "Accordance"	Aleksandr Govorov	Russia	August 8, 2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8re_dtHQwkc
	4	National Choir of the Ukraine	Yevhen Savchuk	Ukraine	April 26, 2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7G_0Hp-t6k
	5	Choir Academy of Choral Art. V.S.Popova	Dmitri Korczak	Russia	April 30, 2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxW3fJkEzJ4
	6	Radio Television of Serbia Choir	Bojan Sudić	Serbia		https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJzFVRn27GE&t=20s
	7	Choir of the Academy of Choral Art	Vladimir Spivakov	Russia	April 8, 2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-cG0N94LPw&t=2457s
	8	The State Moscow Chamber Choir Children's Choir Vesna	Vladimir Minin	Russia	September 8, 2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HE1ctSyVo74
Post-1991	1	Seattle Pro Musica	Karen P. Thomas	USA	October 17, 2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBLBI2pNUzQ
Other Countries	2	Dale Warden Singers	Dale Warden	USA	February 21, 2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5Pec9-ZqmE
	3	Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir	Paul Hillier	Estonia		https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0szOKGsHyk&index=11&list=PLPt7zqMDQ-wmqHIT5P-DUrh1HsyccDYCa-
	4	Latvian Radio Choir	Sigvards Klava	Latvia		https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgBLkrfjys

5	Phoenix and Kansas City Chorale	Charles Bruffy	USA	August 10, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sltC-BnMQos
6	WDR Rundfunkchor	Nicolas Fink	Germany	March 14, 2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG3ERmMtWQs
7	Uppsala Academic Chamber Choir	Stefan Parkman	Sweden	May 18, 2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-lpss0-8ac
8	Dei Cantores	Peter Jermikov	USA	July 23, 2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kns5o9mWE2Q
9	Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic Choir	Violetta Bielecka	Poland	May 17, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8BDwBm7wkE
10	Yale Choral Artists	Geoffrey Douma	USA	August 1, 2013	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjXJeYz8Gxc
11	Choral Intensive Drew University	D. Jason Bishop	USA	February 11, 2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgkhFKl1APs
12	Giovanni Consort	Carl Crossin	Australia	October 7, 2013	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axuXOmfEw7E
13	The Basilica Cathedral Choir, and MEOCCA	Sara Ann Pogorely, Teri Larson	USA	December 31, 2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgTeT9mXuXU
14	Downtown Voices	Stephen Sands	USA	August 13, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4ncOpGjxLY
15	Bach Musica NZ	Rita Paczian	New Zealand	January 23, 2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKVzZEkwj3U
16	Finnish National Opera Chorus	Eric-Olof Soderstrom	Finland	January 8, 2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAiXc_57BvE
17	Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks	Michael Gläser	Germany	June 16, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obDBvXOG6jw
18	Rhodes College Mastersingers	Tony Gardner	USA		http://www.patriciagrady.net/Musichtmls/vespers/11MySoul.mp3