

Family strife prompted the teenaged Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) to be sent from his home in St. Petersburg to Moscow. There he studied with Nikolai Zveref of the Moscow Conservatory. Rachmaninoff lived in Zveref's home, and received the core of his musical training during this period. Zveref was a pitiless (and occasionally violent) taskmaster on the one hand, yet on the other, he thrust his pupils into the heart of Conservatory life. Even as a teen then, Rachmaninoff brushed elbows with the leading Russian musical figures of the day and established himself as a virtuoso pianist and promising composer.

Rachmaninoff's appearance at Queen's Hall, London in April 1899 marked his first significant performance outside Russia. His appearance impressed London critics. The *Musical Times* reported the audience praised Rachmaninoff's conducting and demanded an encore of his performance of his own compositions. At the same time, an air of snobbery, perhaps even condescension, is detected in the faint praise of the *Daily Telegraph*: “The music of young Russia has in its nature something that scarcely ever fails to compel attention.” Anglocentric bias colors a review of Rachmaninoff’s music that was published in the *Musical Opinion*: “It would not necessitate a journey far beyond the four-mile radius from Charing Cross to find a musical composition at least as nearly ‘great.’” In this way, Rachmaninoff’s international debut at once constituted an appraisal of the merits of the music of “young Russia” as well as those of the young Russian.

Rachmaninoff composed the *All-Night Vigil*, Op. 37 in January and February 1915, and the sound of “young Russia” resonates through every movement and measure. The structure of the work, for instance, is indebted to the Russian Orthodox Church. Fifteen movements may be divided into three parts: Vespers (movements 1–6), Matins (movements 7–14) and Prime (movement 15). These constitute prayer services (called “offices”) observed throughout the day and often only within monastic communities, and in the Russian Orthodox tradition, these offices are typically conflated into a single service, the All-Night Vigil. Further, a considerable portion of Rachmaninoff’s *Vigil* music is based on source material indigenous to the Russian Orthodox Church, specifically sacred chant characterized by a single melodic line sung by either a single or multiple voices.

The second movement (“*Blagoslovi, dushe moya*”) is one such example, a choral setting built up around a pre-existing chant.

The text of this movement, Psalm 104, comprises a series of blessings with which the believer praises God for achievements at the Creation. Expressions of thanksgiving are assigned to the upper voices; an alto soloist leads the soprano and alto sections of the chorus. The lower voices take on a more subtle and significant role. The Psalm text opens with an imperative – “*Blagoslovi, dushe moya, Ghospoda*” (“Bless the Lord, O my soul”) – issued from the mouth of the speaker and aimed at his or her own soul. Tenors and basses repeat this injunction in sustained tones, effectively transforming the directive into a mantra. Listeners able to disattend to the ravishing melody sung by the upper voices thus perceive the unremitting reminder of the lower voices – “*Blagoslovi*” (“*Bles*”) – to give thanks always.

In the final measures of the movement, this texture is altered. The basses abandon the mantra and assume a melodic guise, singing a descending scale to the final phrase of the chant sung moments earlier by the sopranos and altos. In this way, the basses now complement the mantra sung by the tenors, as the opening text (“Bless the Lord”) and the final phrase (“who hast created all!”) are heard simultaneously. At the same time, basses descend to astonishing depths. They reach C below the bass clef staff, low enough to prompt the conductor of the premiere performance to compare the likelihood of securing vocalists capable of singing in this register to the likelihood of encountering “asparagus at Christmas.”

The fifth movement (“*Nine otpushchayeshi*”) concludes in a similar manner: the basses descend in stepwise motion to the extreme depth of their range. In fact, they reach a whole step farther than they managed at the end of the second movement. Unlike the second movement however, in which the chorus praised God for the act of Creation, the text of this movement is an entreaty. It was offered first by Simeon, a citizen of Jerusalem described in the gospel of Luke as one who would not see death until he had seen Christ the Savior. On seeing Jesus shortly after his birth, Simeon offered up the prayer heard here in hopes for his own deliverance into salvation. For this reason, the prayer is known as the “Song of Simeon” or, drawing on its first words in Latin, “*Nunc dimittis*” (“Now release”). In the Anglican tradition, the “*Nunc dimittis*” is occasionally sung at memorial and funeral services, emphasizing the text’s original intention as a plea for deliverance to the hereafter. More frequently, the text is interpreted figuratively, as it is here, as a prayer for safe keeping until morning.

The movement is one of several that include a soloist, in this case a tenor. Rachmaninoff set the text in the upper portion of the tenor range, no doubt an effort to convey a sense of earnest emotional intensity in the delivery. To further spotlight the intensity of the tenor soloist, altos and tenors support the solo voice by singing a repetitive musical figure sung at the softest possible dynamic, marked *ppp* (i.e., *pianississimo* or “very, very soft”) in the score. The accompanying voices also sing at a slower pace the same text as the tenor: “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace.” It is a gesture similar to the “*Blagoslovi*” mantra of the second movement. Yet the tenor soloist alone sings the phrase that includes a first-person singular pronoun: “for *mine* eyes have seen thy salvation.” It is a subtle device, but one that affirms the sensitivity with which Rachmaninoff treated the sacred text. Similarly at the close of the movement, Rachmaninoff emphasized the plurality of the chorus at the moment the text turns from individual toward collective expression, “a light to enlighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.” The chorus enters section-by-section, top to bottom: sopranos, altos, tenors, and finally, basses. The solo tenor now blends more fully into the choral texture. As the number of voices increases, the dynamic marking also increases from *pp* to *mf* (i.e., “very soft” to “moderately loud”). Finally, the voices exit as they entered – one-by-one, sopranos, then altos and tenors together, leaving only the bass section to conclude the movement. In this way, Rachmaninoff theatricalized Simeon’s prayer: the solo tenor as Simeon supported by a chorus of believers who speak in unison, then individually, asking for safe keeping at the end of this day as well as the end of days.

The end days were on the minds of many around the time Rachmaninoff composed his *Vigil* in early 1915. As one German soldier was recorded as saying in the BBC documentary *The Great War*, “It was like the end of the world.” And it was 1915 when Canadian poet-soldier John McCrae wrote, “We are the Dead. Short days ago / We lived . . . and now we lie, / In Flanders fields.” Indeed, those sentiments of nationalism that cast a shadow over Rachmaninoff’s London debut had transformed into an aggressive spirit of patriotism. British poet Wilfred Owen witnessed the deadly effects of such patriotism firsthand, prompting him to quote Horace in a sardonic tone, “*Dulce et decorum est / Pro patri mori*” (“Sweet and fitting it is to die for one’s country”). Although the stakes were less high for Rachmaninoff, who waited out the war in Russia and Sweden, his *All-*

Night Vigil is nevertheless better understood as an expression of Russian patriotism than a statement of religious faith – he was not devout.

Expressions of patriotism were not limited to military fronts during the Great War. The French musical community circled the wagons in the form of the National League for the Defense of French Music, which organized to ensure the “predominance of French music in France.” The rhetoric of Arnold Schoenberg is similarly aggressive. He wrote to Alma Mahler (widow of composer-conductor Gustav Mahler) about his desire to teach other modern composers “to venerate the German spirit and to worship the German God.” One must regard these statements with care. Rather than rhetoric of extermination, which post-WWII readers might be tempted to project onto such remarks, Schoenberg’s desire for a German musical hegemony likely had more to do with promoting post-tonal styles of composition, which other composers such as Stravinsky, Debussy, and Ravel avoided.

Rachmaninoff was not exempt from zealous patriotism. In the opening months of WWI, he and Serge Koussevitzky, who later led the Boston Symphony Orchestra, produced concerts to support the Russian war effort. The *All-Night Vigil* (also premiered in support of the Russian war effort) was no doubt motivated in part by a similar sentiment, although Rachmaninoff’s music is largely devoid of obvious contemporary musical influences. Composition was a highly introspective activity for Rachmaninoff. Even as a teenager, experimenting with writing music while still a student of Zveref, Rachmaninoff struggled to hear his own compositional voice amidst the din of other students practicing piano in the same room. In response to a request for privacy, Zveref expelled Rachmaninoff from his teaching studio and did not speak to the young man for roughly three years. The incident did not affect Rachmaninoff’s need for solitude, however. Nearly all Rachmaninoff’s composing occurred in the depths of the Russian countryside, at an estate called Ivanovka situated several hundred miles outside Moscow. In this respect, Rachmaninoff’s compositional activities resemble not those of a compatriot such as Igor Stravinsky, who captured the Russian folk idiom despite living in western Europe, but rather those of Gustav Mahler, who restricted his music writing almost entirely to the privacy and solitude of small “composing huts” isolated in an inspiring natural setting.

In Movement 9 (“*Blagosloven yesi, Ghospodi*”), Rachmaninoff drew connections with earlier movements. For instance, this movement

marks the return of the tenor soloist, who portrays an angel. The text chronicles the period following Jesus's crucifixion: angels taken aback by Jesus's presence among the dead, the discovery by Jesus's followers of an empty tomb and an angel proclaiming resurrection from the dead, and a concluding period of glorifying and thanksgiving. The text is organized in stanzas, each separated by the refrain "Blessed are Thou, O Lord, teach me thy statutes." Rachmaninoff dispatched varying combinations of voices within each verse. He set the refrain to the same musical material each time it returns; however, he also thickened the texture by adding another section of the chorus each time the refrain is heard. The result is a slow and sustained conversion; the chorus persuaded in stages, from the lower voices upward, of the miracle of Jesus's triumph over death. In this way, the refrain acquires increased strength until all voices are duly convinced of God's power and wisdom, at which point the crescendo in dramatic intensity erupts in the form of an ebullient "Alleluia" before the movement concludes with a blissful final utterance, "Slava Tebe, Bozhe" ("Glory to Thee, O God").

Movement 11 ("Velichit dusha moya") is a Magnificat (or "Song of Mary") setting, and it complements the "Song of Simeon" heard earlier. The text constitutes the prayer spoken by Mary at the Visitation (i.e., the occasion when Mary bearing the unborn Jesus visited her cousin Elizabeth bearing the unborn John the Baptist). As with Movement 9, a refrain exalting the virgin mother is inserted between verses. The Magnificat verses are set in the lower voices in the choir, and perhaps curiously for a prayer attributed to the mother of Christ, the principal melody is sung by the basses. This material is set against the refrain, sung by sopranos, altos, and tenors divided variously as three to seven independent voice parts. Basses join for the final phrase of the refrain, thus giving the appearance that Mary also participates in the collective statement of praise. In this way then, Rachmaninoff theatricalized this movement in a manner similar to his treatment of the "Song of Simeon," in which the listener seems to hear the voice of an individual set against the larger choral texture.

Less than three years after composing his *Vigil*, Rachmaninoff left Russia for the final time. Political and social unrest that ensued from the Russian Revolution threatened the safety of his family. Rachmaninoff's relationship with his homeland eroded further still in January 1931, when the *New York Times* published the composer's sharp

critique of Soviet government policy. The official response comprised a (short-lived) ban of Rachmaninoff's music in the Soviet Union. The upheavals of 1917 displaced Russian music in other ways as well. Fellow composers, including Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev, also left the country. The new Communist state separated itself from the Russian Orthodox Church. The Moscow Synodal Choir, which premiered Rachmaninoff's *Vigil*, disbanded. Thus, Rachmaninoff's *Vigil* came to represent the height of the Russian sacred music tradition. It also constituted a highpoint for Rachmaninoff personally. It remains among his best known and highly esteemed works. It was also one of his favorites, perhaps because it preserved in sound that which was no longer accessible: his birthplace, his homeland, the countryside estate, Ivanovka, which spurred his compositional voice. That the composer sought to reconstitute a Russian atmosphere throughout the remainder of his life supports this possibility. Regardless of where he lived, Rachmaninoff preserved Russian customs, welcomed Russian guests, and employed Russian servants. Ultimately, the *All-Night Vigil* may have been a potent and poignant reminder of a lost Russian oasis. Rachmaninoff requested a portion of it – "Nine otpushchayeshi," Simeon's deliverance prayer – to be sung at his funeral, although this wish went unsatisfied when he died in 1943 in Beverly Hills, California.

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