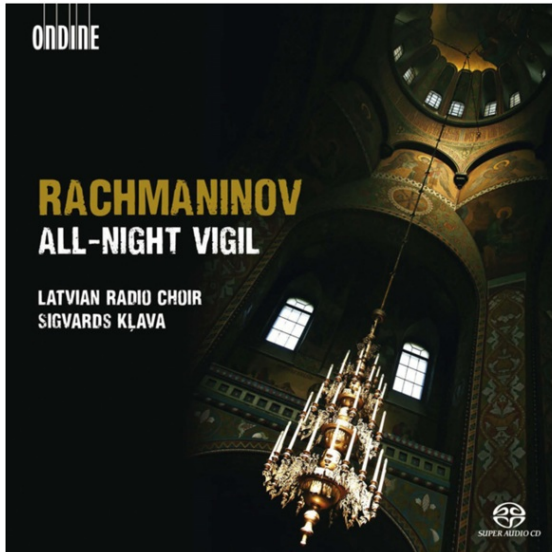




# February



*'There is a wonderfully kaleidoscopic palette of vocal colours throughout, with plenty of sonorous bloom for those celebrated deep bass notes'*

## Malcolm Riley is awed by a sublime recording of Rachmaninov's Vespers

### Rachmaninov

Vespers, 'All-Night Vigil', Op 37

Latvian Radio Choir /

Sigvards Klava

Ondine (P) ODE1206-5 (63' • DDD • T/I)

In a 1939 interview, Rachmaninov confessed that stylistically he 'felt like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien. I cannot cast out the old way of writing and I cannot acquire the new.' Who could blame a sensitive artist such as Rachmaninov – exiled from his Russian homeland and unsympathetic to the waves of turmoil created by his 'modernist' contemporaries such as Bartók, Stravinsky and Schoenberg – for deploring composers who created 'not from the heart but from the head'? Further posthumous critical neglect has thankfully been reversed these past 40 or so years, thanks to the pendulum of good taste, which ensures that good things never ultimately disappear.

Although the symphonies, concertos and piano works have re-attained their rightful places in the repertory, one must not overlook the importance of Rachmaninov's mastery of choral writing. Regarded as one of the most challenging pieces to perform in the *a cappella* repertory, his monumental *All-Night Vigil* is really the last great

crowning achievement of Russian Orthodox choral music, a masterpiece from a composer at the peak of his creative powers.

Composed in less than two weeks, early in 1915, Rachmaninov dedicated the *Vigil* to the memory of Stepan Smolensky, who had introduced him to the glorious legacy of the vigil through his work as director of the Moscow Synodal Choir from 1886 to 1901. This all-male choir's first performance of the work, in March 1915 under Nikolay Danilin, was enthusiastically received by the audience and critics alike. Alexander Kastalsky thought the *Vigil* was 'a contribution of great importance to our church's musical literature...

Of unusual value is this artist's loving and conscientious attitude towards our church chants, for in this lies the promise of a splendid future for our liturgical music.' Alas, this would not be the case. The post-revolutionary Bolshevik authorities drove religious expression underground and the Moscow Synodal School and its Choir were disbanded. The *Vigil* remained unrecorded for half a century until 1965, though some 30 commercial recordings have been made since, including the disc under review here, which was made in

St John's Church, Riga, in May 2011.

Rachmaninov set 15 texts, which span Vespers through Matins to Prime. Nine of the movements were based on traditional Orthodox chants, including not only some of the ancient Znamenny chants but also more recent Greek and Kievan chants. Every human emotion is encompassed within the *Vigil's* pages: praise, meditation, penitence and, finally, proclamation. It makes huge demands on singers' intonation and breath control, and requires a wholehearted engagement with the texts. Needless to say, the Latvian Radio Choir produce an exhilarating performance, a worthy successor to their earlier recording (also for Ondine) of Rachmaninov's other great unaccompanied choral masterpiece, the *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* of 1910.

Since the score's tempo directions lack any metronomic indications, conductors have to judge carefully how to negotiate the work's many gear changes and dynamic topography. Sigvards Klava's spacious approach pays great dividends. Although his tempi are appreciably slower than those of that other first-rate performance, by the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir under Paul Hillier for Harmonia Mundi,