

O RAPTUREOUS RACHMANINOV!

*Then is my soul's anxiety becalmed,
My frowning brow is eased and set at rest,
And happiness seems possible on earth,
And in the open heavens I see God...*

This final stanza from *Wheat Field* by Mikhail Lermontov, taken from one of the poems read at Somerset Chamber Choir's ambitious undertaking last Sunday afternoon, seems an appropriate reflection on the two hours I have just spent, along with a sell-out audience, in this excellent choir's company.

Billed as an atmospheric occasion enhanced with projected iconography, and music interspersed with evocative poetry readings and beautiful arrangements of timeless classics for violin and piano the reality of this event had much to live up to. All of the music in the concert was by Rachmaninov, which might have tempted one to the initial thought that a little more variety might be welcome; on the contrary however, by the end of the concert, one could not fail to be moved by the sheer wealth of beauty present in all of this music, and ultimately one was happy to give oneself up into the arms of such rapturous and endlessly imaginative euphony.

The fifteen songs of the *All-night Vigil*, six of which give the work its more familiar name *Vespers*, provided the choral thread that wove its way throughout the concert; in between some of the songs were placed instrumental and poetic interludes that had clearly been carefully chosen to reinforce the contemplative mood that the choir aimed to evoke. In addition, throughout the movements of the *All-night Vigil*, a curated set of changing religious images relating to the Russian Orthodox faith, thoughtfully themed to reflect the texts being sung, were cleverly projected onto the rough-hewn whitewashed wall behind the choir, seeming to envelop the crucifix hanging there. Particularly stunning were the images of angels that were introduced at the words *The angelic host was filled with awe*, as were representations of the Virgin and Child which occurred at various times throughout the concert. The unusual presentation of this stunning music for unaccompanied choir was innovative and proved to be not only very persuasive but also emotionally powerful.

This was a stylish and accomplished rendering of one of the most challenging works in the choral repertoire. The arresting music of the opening movement *Come Let Us Worship* immediately conveyed the urgency of the call to prayer, while the projected backdrop of colourful cupolas of a Russian Cathedral simultaneously transported the audience to an appropriate setting. Clearly this was going to be heady stuff. The movements that followed were sung with compelling conviction - passionate here, quietly reflective there, exciting and dramatic certainly, but also calm and delicate when the text required it.

On their journey through this most moving of works, the choir treated us to beautiful hushed singing, dramatic changes of dynamic and tempo, exhilarating climaxes, mellifluously sung melodies, finely-tuned harmonies, energetic dance-like rhythms, excellent diction of complex Church-Slavonic texts and, last but not least, those famous extraordinarily low notes which were sung with commendable sonority by those rare members of the bass section who were able to rise (or perhaps descend) to the challenge. Along the way, there were excellent contributions from vocal soloists Luisa De Gregorio and Nick Bowditch, the former singing with a warmth of tone which seemed highly appropriate to the music's nationality, the latter conveying the drama of the text with commendable vigour.

Understandably a little tiredness began to tell in the choir as the work was reaching its conclusion and, very occasionally, ensemble was sacrificed to the higher endeavour of instilling passion into the performance - nevertheless the choir's innate musicality shone to the very end, with the words *Thou hast granted Thy peace to the world* in the penultimate movement attracting the most beautiful pianissimo singing, before the singers somehow summoned the strength to deliver the triumphant final movement. Apart from one or two rare moments of hesitancy when confidence slightly failed them, the choir seemed to follow closely every conducting gesture made by Richard Laing, who must be applauded for bringing such a fine performance of this work to fruition.

Three of the musical interludes, for which the conductor exchanged his baton for the violin, were arrangements of the composer's most famous melodies - *Vocalise*, *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini* (18th Variation), and *Prayer* (adapted from the 2nd Piano Concerto); Anita D'Attellis accompanied on the piano with beautiful touch and tone, and the warmth of sound produced especially in the lower register of the violin was notable, as was the close interplay between these two fine musicians as the musical lines interweaved and combined to great effect. Ms D'Attellis also contributed a solo work, *Elegie* from the composer's Opus 3 piano pieces; this was played with great feeling and empathy for the music, building with perfect pacing to

the central climactic section, before a delightful unwinding of tension in the final pages led to an emotion-laden final few bars ñ this really was spellbinding.

Finally, the five poetic interludes read by the conductor and by different choir members in turn, provided welcome moments of reflection on what we were witnessing ñ the texts, all of which were performed with admirable clarity, were in some cases thought-provoking and left one grappling with some uncomfortable truths.

One audience member was overheard to say that she had just returned from Russia and was fearful that the concert may not adequately match her recent experiences, but by the end she was happy to confess that she found the event utterly moving. I need therefore write no more, other than to say thank you and well done to all involved in conceiving and presenting this highly original and inspiring afternoon's entertainment.

Somerset Chamber Choir's next concert, Bach's *St John Passion* featuring James Gilchrist as *Evangelist*, will be in Wells Cathedral on 27 July 2019.

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