

Three Spires Singers
Truro Cathedral, 5 July 2025

Tavener — Svyati
Tavener — The Last Sleep of the Virgin
Rachmaninov — Vespers

This concert by the Three Spires Singers was memorable for many reasons, all of them good. The technical and musical demands of the programme were significantly different from those offered by most of this choir's concerts, especially because the centrepiece, Rachmaninov's work commonly called *Vespers*, composed in 1915, and more properly titled *All Night Vigil*, has no instruments to help the maintenance of pitch, or give the singers space to relax. The result is a full hour of unaccompanied singing, much of it replete with scary challenges, including multiple divisions of each choral section — soprano, alto, tenor and bass, into two or even three parts. Moreover, its elaborate textures mean that cues onto which new entries can fasten their pitch can be a bit elusive. For that reason and several others, it's the sort of piece in which many performances, including some well-regarded recordings, end a movement noticeably lower in pitch than when they started. On this occasion that happened several times, though recovery was unobtrusively achieved thanks to the provision of a keyboard to give pitch before some of the movements, with a prudent pause beforehand.

One striking feature of the concert was the placing of the singers and audience. The choir was at the west end of the nave — the opposite end from their usual placing just in front of the choir area. This was a definite benefit, for the singing's communication with the west-facing audience was more immediate, perhaps because sound was not dissipated into the high space of the main tower, at the crossing between nave and transepts.

Before the *Vespers* we heard one of the many works by John Tavener (1994–2013) inspired by the style and atmosphere of the Orthodox Church's choral music. *Svyati* was written in 1995, and features a prominent, almost continuous solo cello part. This was beautifully played by Barbara Degener, with just the right balance between

presenting a solo line when there was no singing and, when the choir was singing, speaking out over the choral parts or being a quiet background. It is an engaging piece, especially when done as securely as it was on this occasion. It is also an atmospheric, full of beautiful sonorities and contrasts. But like much of Tavener's Orthodox-inspired works, it is also limited by its focus on just two or three characteristics of that tradition's polyphony, such as drones (used here too ubiquitously) and parallel movement in the vocal parts. On this occasion its slow, undulating progress was ably captured thanks to good pacing by conductor James Anderson-Besant and to the choir's control of gradually shifting dynamics.

The placing of the choir also added to the expressive effect of the other Tavener piece. *The Last Sleep of the Virgin* is scored for string quartet and handbells. As the audience faced the west end, the sound seemed to emerge from the ether, an effect enhanced by the players being well out of our line of sight, and just about as far away as they could be — immediately in front of the high altar. Physical remoteness allied to the cathedral's extraordinary acoustic resonance made the sound's other-world quality all the more effective.

As I say, Rachmaninov's *Vespers* lasts around an hour. One way of offering relief to the choir is to have a soloist or small group sing the chants on which much of the piece is based. However, on this occasion a break was offered by the cathedral's organ scholar, Jeremy Wan who, between the eighth and ninth movements, played improvisations on those chants. For this pair of ears it was an absorbing exercise in spotting the main material amidst the always-convincing elaborations — subtle and evocative.

The Three Spires Singers gave an authoritative and persuasive performance of this extraordinary music. Part of that authority depended on how the group met two challenges that always face choirs reared in non-Russian or non-Orthodox traditions — how to tackle the distinctive sounds of the Russian language in song (I have heard individual movements sung in English, never very convincingly); and whether or not one should attempt the staggered breathing characteristic of

Russian choirs, aiming to produce that distinctive effect of continuous, unfolding expansiveness. To people like me, who has no understanding of the language but has heard a lot of song and opera in Russian, the choir's handling of the language seemed always convincing. And the staggered breathing — not what western choirs usually do — achieved exactly the effects intended.

The work's several solos were strikingly sung by alto Nina Vinther and tenor Henry Laird. And this piece's several calls for extraordinarily low bass notes were beautifully supported by a small cohort of octavist singers who, I was told, spend much of their professional lives touring and singing this and other music requiring notes below bottom C — most of it Russian.

In several places where the text suggests a forcefully dramatic style, the choir delivered in spades. I especially remember the intensity achieved in the seventh movement (the *Gloria*) and the rhetorical power in the later parts of the long twelfth movement, which opens with the *Te Deum*.

In what ways could this performance have been better? Sometimes the composer's precisely indicated crescendos suffered from premature burn-out, and decrescendos from loss of tone as they got quieter. Maintenance of pitch — always a challenge in this piece — was sometimes lost; and it seemed to me that one reason for this was that entries in some of the choir's sections tended to be, kind of, at the bottom of the note. In some movements (notably the tenth), although the choir was clearly aiming for long-phrased expansiveness, there was a loss of clarity in the pulse. But none of these detracted from the fact that this was a strong, wholesome performance, full of character and always absorbing.

Martin Adams

Martin Adams has lived in Camborne since 2016. Between 1979 and 2015 he worked in the Music Department of Trinity College Dublin as a lecturer and latterly as associate professor. In addition to his academic publications, he was for thirty years a frequent contributor of concert reviews to *The Irish Times*.