

Three Spires Review: Rachmaninov and Tavener 5th July 2025.

Very occasionally, one attends a concert that one knows will become a lasting memory. It might be something about the venue, or about the performance, or simply a connection to the music being performed. When all three come together it is a very special occasion indeed. Such was my experience attending the most recent Three Spires Singers concert at Truro cathedral on 5th July.

The programme comprised Rachmaninov's Vespers (All Night Vigil), an extended work for unaccompanied choir and soloists, preceded by two shorter works by the English composer John Tavener: Svyati, for choir and solo cello, and The Last Sleep of the Virgin, for string quartet and handbells.

A wholly 20th century programme then, and an unusual mix for this group of singers and players. To add further novelty, conductor James Anderson-Besant chose to reverse the layout, placing singers at the west entrance and the musicians in the chancel behind the audience. The effect was to create a stunning sense of depth, with the immediacy of the choir's sound framed by a diffuse instrumental bloom filling the entire nave. Svyati emerged as a lonely Orthodox chant heard from a great distance (delivered with precision and purpose by cellist Barbara Degener) in dialogue with simple incantations from the choir over a fixed pedal note. This is Tavener at his most spiritual; never indulgent or sentimental, offering only glimpses of dissonance and at all times reverential to the liturgical Slavonic text.

If Svyati had reassured that 'new music' could be accessible and moving, it soon became clear that The Last Sleep of the Virgin was to demand rather more focus and staying power. The choir remained seated and silent throughout: only visually the focus of attention; sonically everything was happening out of sight. A continuous tintinnabulation of handbells (James Robinson) underpinned dreamy and florid string figurations that spun around the space, beautifully articulated again by Barbara Degener, joined now by Phil Montgomery-Smith (violin I), Nick Beach (violin II) and Ricarda Schmidt (viola). Tavener's language remained simple, a little more dissonant perhaps but equally digestible. The challenge was its unmitigating structure forcing us to concede to a lengthy meditation, which I could see was becoming too extended for some. If anyone reading this review identifies with this I would urge them to find a recording of the piece and put some time aside to listen again in a place of stillness and quietude. The balance in most recordings errs more towards the strings, making it easier to absorb the detail and less strident on the ear.

With the interval behind us, the time had come for the choir to reclaim the spotlight. While Rachmaninov's Vigil does not actually last 'All Night', it does take up the best part of an hour. Sung in Russian and divided into fifteen movements, it is another endurance test: this time for the singers. Their handling of the language was perhaps a little polite, needing grittier consonants, but they were nonetheless clearly in their element: well rehearsed and enjoying the richness of the harmony and part-writing. Soloists Nina Vinther (alto) and Henry Laird (tenor) wove their parts in and out of the main texture, exchanging lines with the choir. Both had excellent diction and intonation. Laird's voice carried strongly throughout; Vinther was generally crisp and clear, if a little short of power in her lower range. And what an extended bottom range this piece has: all the way to low B flats! (the norm would be the F above). Little wonder that those basses were singled out at the end to receive their own applause.

Unaccompanied singing can all too easily drift slowly downward. As a safeguard, Paul Comeau was on hand to provide starting notes for each movement, which served mainly to demonstrate how well the choir was holding its pitch. Such a shame that these cues were given on an electric piano. Having discovered that organist Jeremy Wan had been on standby to perform a short improvisation between sections 8 and 9, one was left puzzling over why he was not asked to provide these cues as well; a chamber organ sound would have been far more in keeping with the context.

Wan's improvisation was a curious and unexpected moment – not referenced in the programme notes and certainly not part of Rachmaninov's score. It was effective all the same, apparently based

around selected Kyiv chants on which some of the Vespers are based. To quote James Anderson-Besant:

'...It solved a problem for us, as the choir were keen to have a little break halfway through to get their breath back (understandably!) before the stamina challenges of 9 and 12. But I think it ended up being a curious little feature in the end...'

This reviewer would agree.

The next Three Spires concert on November 22nd returns to the 19th century and welcomes back the full orchestral forces with an all Brahms programme: his Symphony No. 4 and German Requiem.

The choir is still seeking more male voices and if you think you might be interested in joining, please email membersthreespires@googlegmail.com.

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