



La Tempête: *Nocturne**

19 November (Tuesday) ——— 8.00 pm

All Saints Church
5/7 Grzybowski Square

According to the message of the Book of Genesis, the creation of the world and the reckoning of time began in the evening (Gen. 1:5). It is at this time that the *All-Night Vigil* begins in the Orthodox Church. A service full of singing and rituals, reflecting the dynamics of *transitus* – the transition from darkness to light – leading the participants from the creation of the world, to the fall and expulsion from paradise, suffering, to salvation and light, symbolically lit at *Matins*. Numerous composers have reached for the text of the liturgy, including Pyotr Tchaikovsky, but it is undoubtedly Sergei Rachmaninoff who achieved the greatest mastery thereof. We will hear this work in a paratheatrical version performed by the ensemble La Tempête.

Concert programme

Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873–1943)

All-Night Vigil (Vsénoshchnoye bdéniye)
Op. 37
for choir
(1915)

Byzantine Hymns

Performers:

La Tempête

La Tempête: Nocturne

Russia, January 1915. The Great War has been going on for six months. Economic chaos and war defeats reinforce opposition sentiments. In a few years, the tense political situation will lead to the collapse of the old regime. It was in this social reality that Sergei Rachmaninoff, in less than two weeks, at the turn of January and February, wrote one of his most outstanding works: *All-Night Vigil*, Op. 37 for a cappella choir.

Although Rachmaninoff is primarily known as an excellent pianist and a great symphonist, paradoxically, it is this entirely choral piece that is considered his greatest

achievement. The *All-Night Vigil* consists of settings of texts of a service held in the Orthodox Church in Old Church Slavonic. The name of this service dates back to the times of the ancient Church, when the faithful gathered for all-night prayer meetings before Sundays and holidays. *Vsénoshchnoye bdéniye*¹ consists of settings from the Vespers service (*Večérnja*), Matins (*Útrenja*) and the First Hour (*Pérvyj čas*)².



Sergei Rachmaninoff

author unknown

While writing his last choral work, Rachmaninoff reached for original Orthodox Church melodies. He came across them thanks to his acquaintance with a long-time conductor of the Synodal Choir, Stepan Smolenski, to whom the piece is dedicated. Thanks to him, the composer got to know manuscripts written down in the *stolp* notation, using symbols called *kryuki*³ (hooks), kept in the sacristies of the Cathedral of the Archangel in Moscow. The piece was premiered by the Moscow Synodal Choir conducted by Nikolai Danilin on 10 March 1915.

The *All-Night Vigil*, Op. 37 consists of fifteen movements, nine of which are based on original Orthodox Church melodies. The material of the remaining five movements (I, III, VI, X, XI) was invented by the composer, but – as he himself used to say – they are ‘conscious counterfeits’.⁴ The choir is not accompanied by any instrument. According to the structure of the service, one can differentiate between *Vespers* (Nos. I–VI) and *Matins* (Nos. VII–XV). The parts were based on three types of chants: the so-called *znamenny*, chant in Kyivan style and Greek-style chant. Although Rachmaninoff wrote the piece for a four-part choir, in many fragments there are five, six, eight and even eleven parts (in *Slava v vishnikh Bogu* – No. VII). The composer was particularly fond of the fifth movement of the cycle, *Nunc dimittis*, or the Canticle of Simeon, starting with the words, ‘Now thou dost dismiss thy servant, O Lord.’⁵ One of the characteristic elements of the piece is the last bass sequence performed slowly in the *piano pianissimo* dynamics, reaching a very low note, that is B-flat in the sub-contra octave. Having seen that, Danilin was supposed to exclaim, ‘Now where on earth are we to find such basses?! They are as rare as asparagus at Christmas!’⁶ Of course, he found such singers without any problems. Interestingly, Rachmaninoff wanted the piece to be performed at his funeral; however, it did not happen.

For over one hundred years, the beauty of Rachmaninoff’s *All-Night Vigil* has been moving listeners around the world. It resonates with echoes of a thousand-year-old tradition. The work quickly gained critical acclaim, but the anti-religious policy in the composer’s homeland after 1917 pushed the work to the periphery of attention. It took as many as fifty years for the first recording of the composition to appear – Aleksandr Sveshnikov registered it in 1965.

Dominika Olender

¹ All-Night Vigil in Old Church Slavonic.

² Julita Charytoniuk, Tetiana Zachykievich, *Ludowe formy kanonicznego śpiewu liturgicznego (cerkiewnego i kościelnego – prawosławnego i katolickiego) na Podlasiu*, research paper written as part of the fourth edition of the ‘Blank Pages of Music’ programme, Institute of Music and Dance, Warszawa 2015, p. 15.

³ *Kryuki* – musical notation of Ruthenian Orthodox Church music, used between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.

⁴ Jerzy Szurbak, ‘Sergiusz Rachmaninow (1873–1943). *Wsienoszcznoje bdienije – Całnocne czuwanie op. 37*’, *Gazeta Festiwalowa*, No. 1 (32), 6 May 2007, <http://festiwal-hajnowka.pl/wp-content/uploads/wspolne/gazeta/32/4.html> (accessed 06.09.2024).

⁵ Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition.

⁶ Sergei Bertensson, Jay Leyda, Sophia Satina, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music*, Bloomington – Indianapolis, 2001, p. 191.



La Tempête

The vocal and instrumental ensemble La Tempête was founded in 2015 by Simon-Pierre Bestion. He was driven by a deep desire to explore works by injecting a very personal and embodied commitment. La Tempête finds its source in the expression of links and influences between artists, cultures and eras. It explores the points of contact and legacies with an approach of great liberty. The company has thus developed a very intuitive and sensory relationship with the works, whose reinterpretations

are regularly praised by national and international critics. Simon-Pierre Bestion visits the intimacy between human traditions and the diversity of the traces left by artistic and societal movements. The very essence of the project leads the repertoire of the ensemble to touch several aesthetics, nourishing itself mainly on early and even traditional music, as well as modern and contemporary repertoires. By working with early as well as traditional instruments and exploring vast forms of vocal expression,

La Tempête builds its proposals around the experience of timbre and acoustics. Its projects were therefore born of the idea of a sensory immersion for the spectator, of the quest for a moment that is specific to each encounter between a place, artists and an audience. Simon-Pierre Bestion's creations are the result of a deep interest in collective experience and exploration. The company is open to many disciplines and collaborates with artists from a wide range of backgrounds.

