

'I thank thee, Lord': Russia comes to Coggeshall

The church is in darkness apart from the subdued light from strategically placed candles; there is the residual scent of incense in the air; the deep tolling of a great bell booms out, joined by the tintinnabulation of smaller bells; a capacity audience waits expectantly. The setting was thus prepared for a remarkable performance in St Peter's on the evening of January 12th: Colchester Chamber Choir was to present the Russian Orthodox Night Vigil in Rachmaninov's remarkable music.

Performances of this work are not common, for it makes great demands on even the very best choirs. On the evidence, this Colchester-based choir is one of the very best. Indeed, to hear a better performance one would have to go to one of the top London professional choirs, or to one of the finest college choirs in Oxford or Cambridge. The work requires singers who, unaccompanied, can maintain the pitch through an hour's music; it demands the utmost unanimity in ensemble, balance and tuning, through a wide range of volume and vocal colours; and, above all, enormous concentration from every singer. On every count the choir was superb, a tribute to their distinguished director, Roderick Earle, whose musical and spiritual insights made this interpretation much more than a mere exhibition of choral technique.

For it was a truly spiritual experience. Although Rachmaninov, who was not in any conventional sense a churchman, took advice when composing it (in 1915) from a leading authority on the musical requirements of the Russian liturgy, he overstepped the very rigid boundaries of what was considered appropriate in the way of emotional expression, thus severely limiting the possibilities for genuine liturgical performance. This may seem surprising to a western audience to whom this music may seem the very essence of Holy Russia, its soul deep in the soil of the Motherland. The composer left Russia soon after the Revolution for the United States, never to return. But toward the end of his very last work, the *Symphonic Dances* for orchestra written in 1940, he quoted at length an Alleluia theme from the *Vigil* setting which alternates in a sort of life-and-death struggle with the *Dies Irae* funeral chant. On the final page he wrote 'I thank thee, Lord', as if he had finally come to believe in the triumph of life over death and the victory of the Resurrection. Was this only the nostalgia of an exile for his native land, or does it perhaps suggest something of a religious conversion?

We should beware of thinking of a serious musical concert as little more than a superior form of entertainment, for it can afford a religious experience every bit as valid and even life-changing as a church service. There can have been few agnostics or atheists present in St Peter's that night who did not experience something of the eternal and transcendent through Rachmaninov's music, whether or not they perceived it as anything to do with their conception of what the Church customarily offers. We are thankful that in our church building we have a venue where such things are possible; and we should be profoundly grateful to the Colchester Chamber Choir for giving us this opportunity to discover a fresh vision of the Eternal.