

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF AND THE TRADITIONAL CHANTS

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RACHMANINOFF'S APPROACH TO MUSIC

Throughout his life Sergei Rachmaninoff was constantly thinking about the meaning of life and his fascinating music perhaps can be described as philosophy in sound as opposed to philosophy in words. By nature very reserved, he did not want the message to be too obvious; he wanted to provoke his listeners to think for themselves. Music, as he said, ‘must become a quintessence of the composer’s life experience’.¹ ‘What I try to do when writing music is to say simply and directly that which is in my heart when I am composing. If there be love... or bitterness, or sadness, or religion, these moods become a part of my music’, – Rachmaninoff revealed to the journal *Etude* in 1941.²

Rachmaninoff also had a definite approach to composing music. Firstly, he gave the most important role to melody. In his article ‘*Svyaz’ muzyki s narodnym tvorchestvom*’ (‘The Connection of Music with Folk Art’) he stated his credo: ‘Melody – is music, the main foundation of all music, because a perfect melody presupposes and brings to life all harmonic structure. Melodic inventiveness in the highest meaning of this word is the main life goal of a composer’.³ Rachmaninoff is primarily a melodist. For him melody is a carrier of his internal message. As the critic Boris Asafiev said, ‘Rachmaninoff’s great achievement is in his melodies of great courage and humanity rare even for Russian music’.⁴

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¹ Julian Haylock, *Rachmaninoff. An Essential Guide to his Life and Works* (London, 1997, p. 84).

² Ibid.

³ S.V. Rakhmaninov, *Literaturnoe nasledie* [The Literary Heritage] (Moskva, 1978), 1, pp.70-77.

⁴ B.V. Asafiev, *Izbrannye Trudy* [Selected Works] (Moskva, 1954), 2, p. 295.

Secondly, for Rachmaninoff, ‘there is an apparent and tight connection between music of many great European musicians and folk music of their native countries... they have the spirit of the melodies of their nation deep inside them, and so all their compositions have the image as unique and characteristic of their nation as their national wine and fruit’.⁵

THE ORTHODOX CHANTS

It is not unnatural that in the music of a Russian composer who greatly contemplated the questions of life and death we should find traditional Orthodox chants in abundance. They are mostly the tones of *Oktoikh* based mainly on ancient *Znamenny* chant, and Greek and Kievan chants – the later modifications of *Znamenny* (See the Appendix on ‘Terminology of the Orthodox Church’). In fact, the first love of Rachmaninoff was the sound of Russian church bells that resemble *Znamenny* tunes. ‘The dearest reminiscences of my childhood are the four notes of the Novgorod St. Sofia Cathedral bells, which I often heard when *babushka* (grandmother) took to town on feast days’.⁶

Rachmaninoff was not brought up in a religious atmosphere. Neither was he educated in the field of theology. His knowledge of Christian teaching and History of the Church was so superficial that it can be described as next to non-existent. However, he was introduced into the church by his grandmother Sophia Alexandrovna Boutakova. He remembered: ‘We spent hours standing in the beautiful St. Petersburg churches. Being only a young green-horn, I took less interest in God and religious worship than in the singing, which was of unrivalled beauty, especially in the cathedrals where one frequently heard the best choirs of St. Petersburg. I usually took pains to find room underneath the gallery and never missed a single note. Thanks to my good memory, I also remembered most of what I heard. This I turned into capital – literally – by sitting down at the piano when I came home, and playing all I heard. For this performance my grandmother never failed

⁵ Rachmaninov, *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 1, p. 555.

⁶ Gleb Grakov, ‘Muzykalnoe nasledie Rachmaninova’ [‘The Musical Heritage of Rachmaninoff’], in *Moskovskie eparkhialnye vedomosti* [Moscow Diocese Bulletin] (2006), no. 7-8, p. 158.

to reward me with twenty-five *kopecks*.⁷ Later Rachmaninoff still visited churches frequently, not as a practising Christian but as a musician. As his friend Aleksander Gedike wrote, Rachmaninoff ‘loved church singing very much and quite often, even in winter, would get up at seven o’clock in the morning and hail a cab in the darkness, mostly to drive to Taganka, to the Andronikov Monastery where he stood in the half-darkness of the enormous church through the whole liturgy, listening to the austere ancient chants from the Oktoekh sung by the monks in parallel fifths...’.⁸

Talking about Rachmaninoff and Orthodox chants, it is important to mention the concept of conscious borrowing of material and the ‘subconscious reintegrating the psychically ‘buried’ music material’ not noticed by the composer. As Joseph Yasser argues, there is more influence from Orthodox chants in Rachmaninoff’s music than it is generally acknowledged by musicologists or by the composer himself. The example Yasser uses is the Third Piano Concerto and its opening theme.⁹ The Orthodox chants may have been modified and had ‘some extraneous accretions’,¹⁰ but they were deep down in Rachmaninoff’s sub-consciousness and often entered his music without him realising this.

The influence of Russian sacred music on Rachmaninoff’s melodies (even if they are not the exact replica of the chants) is noticeable. The composer had a marked tendency to advance the melody by steps and to observe the narrowest possible range with frequent repetitions of the same note. The shapes of his melodies resemble *canti firmi* of the Russian Church.¹¹ The great intensity of Rachmaninoff’s expressiveness in its economic austerity also carries the spirit of the Orthodox tunes. According to the composer’s biographer Riesemann, Rachmaninoff acknowledged that ‘Russian Church music had given him so much that is valuable and stimulating’.¹²

⁷ Oscar von Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff’s Recollections Told to Oscar von Riesemann*. Translated from the German by Dolly Rutherford (Freeport, 1970), pp. 33-34.

⁸ Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Aldershot, 1990), p. 30.

⁹ Joseph Yasser, ‘The Opening Theme of Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto and Its Liturgical Prototype’, in *The Musical Quarterly*, 55 (1969), 3, pp. 313-328.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 314.

¹¹ Von Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff’s Recollections*, p. 215.

¹² Ibid.

DIES IRAE

The other, much more prominent feature of Rachmaninoff's music – the Latin chant *Dies Irae* – was not absorbed in childhood. He came to know this chant later in life, most certainly while conducting the works of Berlioz (*Fantastic Symphony*), Liszt (*Dante Symphony*, *Totentanz*) and Mussorgsky (*Songs and Dances of Death*, *Night on the Bare Mountain* [a.k.a. *Night on Bald Mountain*]) – all these works feature this Latin chant. *Dies Irae* is the single most frequently occurring tune in Rachmaninoff's music. Yet even as late as 1931 Rachmaninoff seems to have had only a hazy knowledge of its origin.¹³ The theological and historical side did not interest him. For Rachmaninoff, as for the other composers, *Dies Irae* became a symbol of death and its inevitability. Yet there is a striking difference: no other composer has used *Dies Irae* so much and so often.

In the case of both the Orthodox chants and *Dies Irae*, one cannot but agree that the composer used them 'as idiosyncratic devices to help transmit his message'.¹⁴ This paper attempts to investigate how the chants came into Rachmaninoff's life and music and what was their message; i.e., what they can tell about the composer and how contemporaries and critics understood them.

From childhood Rachmaninoff's life lacked stability, primarily because of the strained relations between his parents and their divorce. He definitely had happy moments, but they all quickly came to an end. Even his music career (studying in St. Petersburg and then in the Moscow Conservatory) was not smooth. He witnessed the disintegration of relations between dear relatives and friends; he witnessed the death of his dear sister; he witnessed his family's loss of possession of nearly all their ancestral manor houses; he witnessed hardship and poverty that was painful not because he himself did not have enough to eat but because he could not help his mother.¹⁵

¹³ Only in 1931 Rachmaninoff did show an interest in researching the history of *Dies Irae* and asked his friend and musicologist Yasser to provide him with the music of this funeral chant in its entirety – but without offering a word of explanation for his keen interest in this. Vincent Pallaver, 'Rachmaninoff and *Dies Irae*', 2004, p. 14: www.victoryvinny.com/svr_and_di/RachmaninoffandDiesIrae

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Boris Nikitin, *Sergei Rakhmaninov i Fyodor Shalyapin* (Moskva, 1998), pp. 22-30.

He lived in the country that was rapidly changing and galloping down a steep hill. He lived at the time when people were preoccupied with the theme of destruction and ‘renewing fire’ like Scythian and futurist poets and artists on one hand, and social revolutionaries on the other. The prophetic philosophers like Vladimir Soloviev were foreseeing the end of the world. Rachmaninoff’s view of life can be perceived as rather sombre and even fatalistic, and ‘it is not surprising that the medieval plainchant from the Requiem Mass, *Dies Irae*, insinuated its way in some form or another into so many of his compositions’.¹⁶ Julian Haylock calls it Rachmaninoff’s ‘almost pathological obsession with death since childhood’.¹⁷

Rachmaninoff himself left no hint whatsoever as to why he used *Dies Irae* so extensively. His thoughts perhaps may be illustrated by the texts of his famous songs which definitely offer some insight into his soul. One of them ‘*Prokhodit vyo*’ written in 1906 goes as follows:

‘All things depart, no single thing returneth.
Life hurries on, like moments as they pass.
Words uttered once find echo in oblivion.
The dawn of yesterday who shall recall?
A flower grows, its petals soon are faded.
The flame may flare, and glowing cease to burn...
The water roll, the current bears them onward...
So in my Song the bloom of joy is dead!’¹⁸

It is not so much obsession or fear, but rather a great sadness about the momentary nature of our existence in this world.

In some works Rachmaninoff juxtaposes the Orthodox chants (or thematic material influenced by them) with the *Dies Irae*, most notably in his First

¹⁶ Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 28.

¹⁷ Haylock, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 34.

¹⁸ Проходит всё, и нет к нему возврата. Жизнь мчится вдаль, мгновения быстрой.

Где звуки слов, звучавших нам когда-то? Где свет зари нас озарявших дней?
Расцвёл цветок, а завтра он увянет. Горит огонь, чтоб вскоре отгореть...
Идёт волна, над ней другая встанет... Я не могу весёлых песней петь.
Слова Д. Ратгауза. English version by Edward Agate. S. Rachmaninoff, *Songs*. Op. 26,
Vol. II, Boosey and Hawkes, 1973, p. 51.

Symphony and in the last work, *Symphonic Dances*. The interpretation of their contrast can reveal perhaps important aspects of Rachmaninoff's personality and therefore of his music.

THE FIRST COMPOSITIONS

Rachmaninoff started to compose Orthodox Christian Music when he was still a budding beginner. 'The Mother of God in never-slumbering prayers' was written in 1893.¹⁹ Possibly it was just an exercise in part-writing following an *a capella* canon *Deus Meus* which was his counterpoint examination work at the Moscow conservatoire. Rachmaninoff was keen to master an extensive repertoire as a composer and the Orthodox prayer provided a good opportunity so sharpen his skills. Some critics believe that 'in this short work the composer seems already to have found something of the colour and style of his later liturgical works'.²⁰ The contemporary critic Kruglikov noted that the composition had 'much talented writing but with a certain flippancy in the setting of the religious text and little insight into the words of the prayer'.²¹

The other 'Orthodox' work, 'Panteley the Healer', was written in 1899. It is a setting of a secular poem by Konstantin Tolstoy about the popular saint. It is known that Rachmaninoff enjoyed performing the piece himself with friends, one person to a part.²² Like his later masterpiece 'The Liturgy' these pieces are not based on traditional chants and have only slight resemblance to them.

There is an interesting remark once made by Rachmaninoff: 'I think that on the whole the influence of the Church on our music is overestimated. Church composers themselves turned to books with ancient tunes'.²³ It appears that for him Church music consists of the compositions of professional composers – sacred art music – while traditional chants are not so much 'art' as expression of people's feelings – folk creativity. This is very much in accordance with the concept of kinship between Russian folk songs and traditional

¹⁹ 'V molitvakh neuspyayushchuyu Bogoroditsu'.

²⁰ Gerard McBurney, Sleeve Notes to the CD: *Music from St. Petersburg*, Joyful Company of Singers, Peter Broadbent (Meridian, 1990), CDE 84257.

²¹ Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninoff* (Oxford, 2001), p. 148.

²² Ibid.

²³ Rakhmaninov, *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 2, p. 555.

church chants propagated by Stepan Smolensky. Rachmaninoff almost certainly shared Smolensky's views.

Stepan Smolensky was the leading figure in the Renaissance of Russian sacred music which covered the period of 1890-1917. The famous director of the Moscow Synodal School and Choir²⁴ was the best specialist in the *kryuki* neumatic notation, published extensively, and resurrected the Russian traditional chants that were nearly forgotten (during the long period of imprisonment of Russian Church music into 'Europeanism'). He also had a remarkable gift to inspire composers to write music for the Orthodox Church based on the traditional chants.

The meeting between 'the guru' of the Russian sacred music and the young composer took place in 1897 in Moscow. Smolensky presented to Rachmaninoff a text of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. There is also evidence that Rachmaninoff tried studying *kryuki* with Smolensky.²⁵ From Smolensky he also learnt about the free rhythm and peculiar heterophony of the Orthodox chants.²⁶ Alfred Swan, who personally knew Rachmaninoff, wrote that it was Smolensky, who 'implanted in Rachmaninoff, his most prominent pupil, a deep love for ancient melodies'.²⁷

THE LITURGY OF ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

However, the young composer did not produce anything 'seriously' sacred till later in life, when Smolensky was already dead. Rachmaninoff said that 'the highest quality of any art is its sincerity'.²⁸ His contemporary Alexander

²⁴ The Synodal Choir (*Sinodalny Khor*), originally the Patriarchal Choir, was established in Moscow in 1589 when the Russian Orthodox Church became a Patriarchate, with the newly elected Patriarch Jove. It was the second largest choir after the Tsar's singers (later the Imperial Court Singing Chapel in St. Petersburg, Pridvornaya Kapella). In 1830 a small private school was attached to the Synodal Choir where young boys were taught singing. In 1857 the school was given official recognition, in 1886 it was turned into a secondary school with special choral educational and had a task to prepare singers and choirmasters, effectively becoming a College of Church Music.

²⁵ *Molodye gody Rachmaninova. Pisma. Vospominaniya* [Young Rachmaninoff. Letters. Memoirs] (Leningrad, 1949), p. 152; von Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections*, p. 244.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Alfred and Katherine Swan, 'Rachmaninoff: Personal Reminiscences', *The Musical Quarterly* 30 (1944), 1, p. 138.

²⁸ Rachmaninov, *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 1, p. 70.

Ossovsky wrote, ‘this artist creates... only when he hears a compelling inner summons to compose, when a rich stock of ideas, images and moods has accumulated in his soul... that is why his art is notable for its persuasiveness and inner compulsion and is always afire with living and warm blood’.²⁹ If he did not compose for the Church, it was because he had no internal urge to do so.

By 1910 his views on religion and faith may have undergone some changes. Martyn writes: ‘It is clear that by the time of the *Liturgy* Rachmaninoff could indeed be called ‘religious’ in outlook if not in strict practice’.³⁰ As with other aspects of his life, he kept his religion to himself, yet it is not without significance that *The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* is the first but not the last of his compositions to which he appended the pious epigraph ‘Thanks be to God’.³¹

The Liturgy was written with great enthusiasm. ‘I have been thinking about the *Liturgy* for a long time and for a long time I was striving to write it... Not for a long time have I written anything with such pleasure’, the composer wrote in a letter to his friend.³²

Rachmaninoff realised that he needed guidance on the subject of the main Orthodox service and as Smolensky had died he took courage to ask for help from Aleksandr Kastalsky the most successful composer of Russian sacred music, the brightest star of the ‘New Direction in liturgical music’, otherwise known as the ‘Moscow School’.³³ It was started by Smolensky and advocated the principle that the traditional chants are the only true foundation for sacred music. Rachmaninoff called Kastalsky ‘the Rimsky-Korsakov of Russian sacred music’. He emphasised his admiration of Kastalsky’s works and said to him: ‘I believe you from the bottom of my heart and will try to follow the same path as you follow and which belongs only to you alone’.³⁴

²⁹ A.V. Osovksy, ‘S.V. Rachmaninoff’ (*The Word*, no.10, 1904), in *Russians on Russian Music, 1830-1880: an Anthology*, ed. Stuart Campbell (Cambridge, 1994), 2, pp. 175-178.

³⁰ Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 218.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Letter to Morozov, in Rachmaninoff, *Literaturnoe Nasledie*, 2, p. 390.

³³ M.A. Lisitsyn, ‘O novom napravlenii v russkoi tserkovnoi muzyke’ [‘On the New Direction in Russian Church Music’], *Muzikal’ny truzhennik* [The Music Worker], 1909; also in *Russkaya dukhovnaya muzyka*, 3, p. 525.

³⁴ Letter to Kastalsky, in Rachmaninoff, *Literaturnoe Nasledie*, 2, p. 390.

However, in 1910 Rachmaninoff did not discuss with Kastalsky the question of how to apply and to harmonise the traditional chants – the central issue of the New Direction. The questions which he asked were mostly about the order of the service (*antiphons*, *prokimenons*, etc.) and their texts. They were mostly very trivial. Sadly, they reveal the composer's shocking ignorance not only of the orders of the services but also of the texts of the Gospels.³⁵ Rachmaninoff also occasionally got stresses wrong in Church Slavonic, producing monstrosities like 'i douhovi Twoemu' ('and to thy spirit').³⁶ All his blunders were patiently corrected by Kastalsky. Rachmaninoff himself counted forty one corrections made by Kastalsky.³⁷

Contemporaries were expecting the work eagerly. 'Liturgy must be of exceptional interest the more so since Rachmaninoff is under the influence of the theories of S.V. Smolensky'.³⁸ In fact, in 1910 Rachmaninoff did not 'follow the same path' as Kastalsky and Smolensky but took as a model for his work the free style of Tchaikovsky's *Liturgy* (1878) – which was not in accordance with the 'New Direction'. As a result he produced sacred music as art which, although written under the influence of the Orthodox chants, was still his 'individual' composition, a concert piece.

The Liturgy was performed on the 25th of March in 1911. It was highly esteemed by critics who wrote that the music was truly inspiring. 'The majestic silence, the deepest attention, the inspired facial expressions witnessed that Rachmaninoff found the way to the listeners' hearts', wrote Osovsky after the concert.³⁹ Yet the composition did not find much love with church-goers and church authorities who did not appreciate its 'modernity'.⁴⁰ As with Tchaikovsky's *Liturgy* it was found that 'music dominated the text and carried thoughts from a church to a concert hall'.⁴¹ Contemporary

³⁵ Letter to Slonov, in *Ibid.*, p. 338.

³⁶ Letter to Kastalsky, in *Ibid.*, p. 392.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

³⁸ V. Yakovlev, 'S.V. Rakhmaninov' (*Russian Olden Times*, 1911), in Anthology, ed. Campbell, p. 184.

³⁹ Grakov, 'Muzykal'noe', p. 158.

⁴⁰ Anthony Antolini, 'Rediscovering Rachmaninoff': www.kteh.org/productions/docs/rachrelease.html

⁴¹ A. Kychigin, 'Tserkovnoe penie' ['Church Singing'], Moskva, 1899, in *Russkaya dukhovnaya muzyka v dokumentakh i materialakh* [Russian Sacred Music in Documents and Materials] (Moskva, 2002), 3, pp. 423-424.

musicologists tend to look at it as a practise run before *The Vigil*, although *The Liturgy* is ‘outstandingly beautiful and musically satisfying in its own right’.⁴²

THE ALL NIGHT VIGIL

It was Rachmaninoff’s *The All Night Vigil* that proved to be highly popular with the ‘Church camp’ as well. In this work Rachmaninoff applied all the principles propagated by Smolensky and his school. The well-known masterpiece, in comparison with the previous sacred works by the composer, does not contain much ‘personal’ material. It is built mostly on the traditional chants.⁴³ Rachmaninoff only subjected them to some variation treatment and provided them with wonderfully rich harmonies which – in accordance of the principles of the Moscow School – do not follow the rules of Western harmonic practice but rather take care to preserve the identity and character of the chant. He masterfully used rhythmic contrasts, a wide range of texture, dramatic changes of dynamics. The voice-leading is also remarkable given that there was not much scope for independence: the words were pronounced at the same time and there were no more than four notes per syllable – as in the traditional chants. The most important features of *The Vigil* that it shared with other masterpieces of Russian sacred music of that time as described by Professor Antonin Preobrazhensky were:

- the use of ancient sacred chants: ‘in new compositions the chants kept their life, flexibility, the mighty force of their expressiveness and beauty’;⁴⁴ the chants were not just *cantus firmus* for harmony as in

⁴² Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 218.

⁴³ E.g. ‘Blagoslovi’, ‘Vzbrannoi’ – Greek chants; ‘Svete Tikhy’, ‘Nyne otpushchaeshi’ – Kievan chants;

‘Khvalite’, ‘Blagosloven’, ‘Slavoslovie’, ‘Dnes Voskrese’ – *Znamenny* chant. The others six are his interpretation of motives characteristic of Russian Church music, ‘conscious counterfeits’ as Rachmaninoff described them. (Haylock, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 55). One who is familiar with the *Znamenny* chant cannot distinguish between the melodies composed by Rachmaninoff himself and those he borrowed, so masterly the composer used traditional sacred popevki; see Vladimir Morosan, *Choral Performance in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, Thesis A.MUS.D., University of Illinois, 1984, p. 306.

⁴⁴ Antonin Preobrazhensky, *Kul’tovaya muzyka v Rossii* [The Cult Music in Russia] (Petrograd, 1924); also in *Russkaya dukhovnaya muzyka*, 3, p. 664.

harmonisations of the 19th century, ‘they began to be the main criteria of the style, they dictated the style’;⁴⁵

- the creation of new melodies using typical melodic and rhythmic formulae of ancient chants thus ‘combining the historic approach, national heritage and free creativity’;⁴⁶
- following the principle of nationality in music and arranging sacred chants as exemplified in folk songs, as ‘we can consider Russian only those elements that have crystallised in Russian folk music’.⁴⁷ Preobrazhensky called the ‘New Direction’ ‘the national style in sacred music’.⁴⁸

Rachmaninoff dedicated his new work to Stepan Smolensky as if thanking his former teacher for his inspiration and advice, the value of which he at last realised and applied the theory in practice. Smolensky would have been very proud of Rachmaninoff’s achievement: he used ‘to measure’ the success of new compositions by how much sympathy they found with old-believers⁴⁹ many of whom were interested in the current developments in sacred music. Rachmaninoff’s *Vigil* was received by them very warmly. In an article after the first performance given by the Moscow Synodal Choir on the 10th of March, 1915, Yakov Bogatenko⁵⁰ first complimented Rachmaninoff for ‘the respect towards the sacred texts’ whose contents were clearly audible thanks to the simultaneous pronunciation – ‘the first principle of old singing’. He then thanked Rachmaninoff for using the traditional chants: ‘there is no great necessity to invent new church melodies, for at the service of composers there is an inexhaustible treasure of purely folk tunes not produced by individuals but born amidst a mass of people ages ago under the influence of deep national and religious feelings’. Then Bogatenko made comparisons: ‘In Rachmaninoff’s *Vigil* the traditional chants always dominate the harmony

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 665.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 667.

⁴⁹ Old-believers – a group that did not accept reforms introduced by Patriarch Nikon in 1652-1666 and seceded from the ‘official’ Russian Church. Old-believers want to preserve the Old Rite of the Russian Orthodox Church.

⁵⁰ Yakov Alekseevich Bogatenko (1880-1941) – old-believer, historian, icon-painter, choir-conductor, art critic (only from 1905 could old-believers express their views publicly) – wrote one of the first reviews of Rachmaninoff’s *All-Night Vigil* in 1915.

and are never overshadowed by it, as is the case with other composers, and that is why it makes such a deep impression on listeners... The religious feelings are so much stronger than in other work by Rachmaninoff'. In his conclusion, Rachmaninoff's *Vigil* was 'a great achievement, a most significant contribution to the treasure of our sacred music and a remarkable landmark in the development of the composer'. Bogatenko also noticed that 'perhaps never had Rachmaninoff so closely approached common Russian people, their style and their soul as in this composition'.⁵¹ *The Vigil* is now considered 'the absolute peak of Russian sacred music'.⁵²

There is no doubt that Rachmaninoff enjoyed working with the chants very much. As Haylock writes, this true masterpiece 'gives the most vivid emotional potency to Rachmaninoff's obsession with chant-like material'.⁵³

Rachmaninoff's reputation as a composer of sacred music and an expert in arranging the traditional chants after the success of *The Vigil* was such that during the *Sobor* (the General Council) of the Russian Orthodox Church in September 1917 the committee on church singing decided to involve in their work Kastalsky and Rachmaninoff.⁵⁴ Sergei Rachmaninoff with his masterpiece certainly eclipsed the success of Grechaninov, Chesnokov and other stars of Russian sacred music and became the best known representative of the Moscow Synodal School.⁵⁵

THE ORTHODOX CHANTS IN SECULAR MUSIC

The Orthodox chants appeared in Rachmaninoff's secular music too. Rachmaninoff himself said that he used *Oktoikh* tones in his First Symphony. However, there are no direct quotations, just 'the religious intonations', as

⁵¹ Y.A. Bogatenko, 'Voskreshenie drevnosti' ['Resurrecting Antiquity'], in *Russkaya dukhovnaya muzyka*, 3, p. 654.

⁵² M.P. Rakhmanova, 'Vstupitelnaya stat'ya', in *Russkaya dukhovnaya muzyka*, 3, p. 20.

⁵³ Haylock, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 55.

⁵⁴ S. Zvereva, 'Vstupitel'naya stat'ya' ['Foreword'] to 'Pomestny Sobor Russkoi Pravoslavnui Tserkvi. Materialy o tserkovnom penii' ['The General Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. Materials on Church Singing'], in *Russkaya dukhovnaya muzyka v dokumentakh i materialakh*, 3, p. 682.

⁵⁵ Rachmaninoff's *Vigil* may be regarded as a culmination in the use of choral orchestration which composers of the Moscow Synodal School have been developing continually; see Morosan, *Choral Performance*, p. 307.

Martyn puts it.⁵⁶ The Third Symphony also bears the influence of the Orthodox Chants. ‘We are reminded at the start of those *Oktoikh* – though the apparently churchly opening may not be an actual quotation for a religious chant; the opening is almost shy, but engaging: it invites attention modestly’, writes Anderson.⁵⁷

In the beginning of the finale of the Second Piano Concerto, after a short orchestral introduction, the piano enters into a cadenza before the first subject proper, a theme which, like the openings of all Rachmaninoff’s finales, has rhythmic rather than melodic interest and which closely resembles his early sacred piece ‘Mother of God’ (‘V molitvakh’).⁵⁸ Many liturgical melodies move by adjacent steps in the scale, and the same approach is felt in the gently undulating contours of many of Rachmaninoff’s most characteristic melodies – the mottoes of the Second and Third Symphonies, ‘in the opening themes of the Second and Third Piano Concertos its influence is most persuasive’.⁵⁹

In the Third Piano Concerto the use of the Orthodox chants can be seen more obviously. The thorough analysis of the thematic material of this Concerto and its alleged prototype – the Kievo-Pechersky chant – was made by the composer’s friend Joseph Yasser who ‘discovered’ the similarity upon his acquaintance with the music of Kievo-Pecherskaya Lavra in 1935 (see Music Supplement 1). In this case, Rachmaninoff in his letter denied any ‘conscious’ borrowing. He wrote about his tune: ‘It simply ‘wrote itself’! You will probably refer this to the ‘unconscious’!... I was thinking only of the sound. I wanted to ‘sing’ the melody on the piano, as a singer would sing it and to find a suitable orchestral accompaniment.... At the same time I realise that this theme has, involuntarily, taken on a folk and ritual character. I have mentioned such a possible influence above’. In the case of the Third Piano Concerto, Yasser proved his point very well.

⁵⁶ Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 98.

⁵⁷ W.R. Anderson, *Rachmaninov and His Pianoforte Concertos* (London, 1948), p. 23.

⁵⁸ Norris, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 115. The easily recognizable Easter Chant (the same as Rimsky-Korsakov used in his *Easter Overture*) can be heard in the fourth of *Fantaisie-tableaux* (Suite no.1 for two pianos) inspired by the poetic text of Aleksei Khomyakov’s ‘*Svetly Prazdnik*’ (‘The Light Feast’). *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁹ Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 30.

As far as other works are concerned, as Yasser puts it, ‘more often than has been realised Rachmaninoff utilized many fragments from the Russian sacred repertory in his secular works’. Further research in this area could undoubtedly discover many other similarities likewise in the Third Concerto, particularly if one bears in mind that Rachmaninoff ‘was very eager to seek out uncommon but still existing practises in the field of Russian sacred music, whether they were unusual monastic performances of the old (*Znamenny*) chants in crude intervallic progressions of parallel fifths... or bold displays of locally-coloured masterly bell-ringing’.⁶⁰

THE EXTENSIVE USE OF THE *DIES IRAE*

The *Dies Irae* entered Rachmaninoff’s works straight from the beginning. The traces of it can be found even in the early work, *Prince Rostislav* (1891).⁶¹ Between the failure of the First Symphony and the following renaissance there was a period of recuperation after which Rachmaninoff emerged with a markedly different style, as exhibited in his Second Piano Concerto. ‘The gypsyesque melodic and harmonic inflections and demonic intensity of the First Symphony have no place here. Rachmaninoff forged a new creative path that set the standard for the remainder of his creative output’.⁶² However, there was one thing in common that remained for ever after – the presence in one form or another of *Dies Irae*.

According to Vincent Pallaver, the chant is present in over a third of Rachmaninoff’s 45 works. In his article containing the most attentive investigation of any traces of *Dies Irae* in all Rachmaninoff’s works, Pallaver comes to the conclusion that there are certain patterns in which the composer used the chant.⁶³

⁶⁰ Yasser, ‘Opening Theme’, p. 327.

⁶¹ Pallaver, ‘Rachmaninoff’, p. 15.

⁶² Haylock, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 31.

⁶³ Pallaver, ‘Rachmaninoff’, pp. 30–31. The three patterns are: 1. Using the tune for an effect as a quotation of the ‘Death’ motif, most notably in *The Isle of the Dead*; 2. Using the tune as thematic material, having slightly altered its structure musically and rhythmically, in some cases it is just the four opening notes, in others, an altered or extended version (*The Bells*, the Fourth Concerto); 3. Using the tune as an integral part of the work’s form but not as a musical theme, mostly in the solo piano works in rapid figuration accompaniment or a single reference after the climax of the piece (*Etudes-Tableaux*).

THE BELLS

Much about Rachmaninoff's philosophy of life can be seen in *The Bells* where he extensively used *Dies Irae*. The composer himself was very fond of this piece in which he expressed 'the varying shades of human experience'.⁶⁴ Rachmaninoff on several occasions said that his most successful and most favourite compositions were *The Bells* and *The All-Night Vigil*. They are true masterpieces, examples of superior orchestration and most colourful choral writing. But apart from being great musical achievements they are perhaps his most eloquent productions, the best messengers of what he wanted to convey with his music.

The four parts of *The Bells* represent the four phases of human life: Silver Sleigh Bells for childhood, Golden Wedding Bells for adolescence, Bronze Alarm Bells for mature age, Iron Bells for death. In the third and fourth movements, the presence of *Dies Irae* is naturally expected. But in the first parts of this symphonic cantata ('Silver Bells' of Childhood – 'the most exuberant' music by Rachmaninoff⁶⁵) and in the second movement – amidst the joy of innocence and love – the presence of the funeral chant is not natural for everyone. However, for Rachmaninoff it certainly is. The singing reminds us about the forthcoming finale and the 'universal slumber' very soon. With the rocking phrases of the string instruments the *Dies Irae* is present in all four vividly contrasting parts (see Music Supplement 2). It can be considered as the unifying idea – the leitmotiv of the work.⁶⁶ Rachmaninoff must have been very seriously 'wounded' by the sharp realization of mortality and the inevitable end for everything and everyone.

Julian Haylock calls *The Bells* 'a work like no other by Rachmaninoff'.⁶⁷ Contemporaries greatly appreciated it as well. The reaction of Sergei Taneyev, Rachmaninoff's greatly respected teacher from the Moscow Conservatory, is remarkable: 'Sincerity and spontaneity have always been vital aspects of Rachmaninoff's music.... *The Isle of Dead* and *The Bells* reveal the barely

⁶⁴ Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff. A Lifetime in Music* (New-York, 1956), p.185.

⁶⁵ Norris, *Rachmaninoff*, pp. 154-155.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Haylock, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 53.

concealed feelings of hopeless anguish and despair ... the heightened anguish and noble tragedy characteristic of this great artist'.⁶⁸

JUXTAPOSITION OF *DIES IRAE* AND THE ORTHODOX CHANTS

The First Symphony

On the one hand, as Rachmaninoff said, he used the *Oktoikh* chants for this Symphony (1895). On the other hand, this work is full of thematic use of the *Dies Irae* that would come to characterize much of his later works. 'The four-note motif takes centre stage as a main theme yet is seamlessly integrated into the overall form'.⁶⁹ The score's epigraph 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord' – that was undoubtedly appended by the composer himself⁷⁰ – reveals a programme appropriate for the use of *Dies Irae* as the theme of Judgement. There must have been a hidden programme to the Symphony but Rachmaninoff, as in most cases, did not reveal it. The Symphony was dedicated to his first love Anna Lodyzhenskaya, a married lady. Was the music about personal or about bitter contemporary events? Was the epigraph taken from the Bible or from Tolstoy's 'Anna Karenina' with whose destiny the young composer may have connected sufferings of his beloved Anna? Is the Symphony about the unfairness of life in general? Certainly, the music seems to be more serious than youthful infatuation. The constant re-appearance of the *Dies Irae* through the whole work can only indicate that whatever feelings a man can have, whatever deeds he makes, all will be finished by death and for everything he will have to give an answer before God.

Dies Irae is the main theme of the first movement. The second theme attempts to gain control but in vain: the funeral chant is a winner. The same scenario can be seen in all the other movements: *Dies Irae* always manages to subdue the other thematic material, some of which is based on the Orthodox chants.⁷¹ In the climax of the fourth movement, the Latin

⁶⁸ *Russian Musical Gasette*, 1913, in *Russians on Russian Music*, ed. Campbell, p. 185.

⁶⁹ Pallaver, 'Rachmaninoff', p. 15.

⁷⁰ Norris, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 99.

⁷¹ The detailed description of all the developments in the four movements of the First Symphony and of the struggle between *Dies Irae* and the other thematic material is given in Pallaver, 'Rachmaninoff', pp. 15-16.

chant is blazed by brass instruments creating a fiery impression. We see a very different ending in *The Symphonic Dances* (1940).

The Symphonic Dances

Rachmaninoff wrote this work fully realizing that it would be his last composition.⁷² It contains many quotations from his earlier works (including the *First Symphony*), as if summing up his life experience. Originally the composer planned to assign the programmes ‘Noon’, ‘Evening’, and ‘Midnight’ to the three movements. It seems that Rachmaninoff pondered the idea of development: the cycle of human life as in *The Bells*, the cycle of nature in *The Symphonic Dances*. In *The Bells*, the development is not a proper cycle though, it is a line of progress towards non-existence; in *The Symphonic Dances* the prospect is not gloomy. *Dies Irae* is there both ‘in fairly obvious quotations and in certain rhythmic and melodic mutations’,⁷³ sinister and powerful as usual. But in the conclusion of the last movement, in marked contrast to the *First Symphony* (and to the first movement of *The Symphonic Dances*) the *Dies Irae* theme is finally vanquished and the movement’s other theme confidently concludes the piece. The victorious theme is the Alleluia of *Znamenny* chant. The coda of the last movement is in effect an orchestral transcription of ‘Blagosloven esi Gospodi’ – the ninth number from ‘The Vigil’.⁷⁴ In the manuscript (26 bars before the end), Rachmaninoff wrote ‘Alleluia’,⁷⁵ – an act which for musicologists marks a convenient finale: a triumph of life over death.⁷⁶ For some this is more specific. As Barrie Martyn writes, ‘in *The Vigil* the Alleluias bring to a close the story of Christ’s resurrection, and it was surely this event which the composer had in mind as he wrote the final, confident pages of *The Symphonic Dances*. On this interpretation with the death motto *Dies Irae* finally vanquished by the church chant, he was not only portraying the ultimate victory of Life over Death but making an affirmation of his own religious faith which, for all his

⁷² It has been recognised as ‘one of Rachmaninoff’s crowning achievements’ (Haylock, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 84).

⁷³ Norris, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 103.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Pallaver, ‘Rachmaninoff’, p. 30.

fear and scepticism of earlier years, had in the end led him to an unconditional acceptance of the reality of God, the Resurrection and a life hereafter'.⁷⁷ It is significant, too, that Rachmaninoff should have written at the end of his last work, the words 'I thank thee, Lord'.⁷⁸

RACHMANINOFF'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE: THE THEMES OF DEATH AND GOD

Sergei Rachmaninoff was notoriously secretive and reserved. He did not talk about himself or his feelings and did not like philosophical discussions. As his relative Lyudmila Rostovtseva-Skalon recalled, as soon as the talk became serious he would try to change the subject or leave. Even his wife did not know what he was working on until he finished. When asked to explain what his pieces were about he replied: 'All is expressed in them'.⁷⁹

Undoubtedly, Rachmaninoff was always mindful of death. One may call this a fatalistic philosophy.⁸⁰ But one may also see wisdom in this approach: 'Memento mori' and your life will make more sense. This approach is uncomfortable and disturbing yet it also has a profound effect. The *Dies Irae* theme in Rachmaninoff's music seems to have different shades of meaning:

- The fear of death as undisputable certainty, the great sadness of the inevitable 'good-bye' to everything and everyone dear, as in *The Isle of the Dead* and *The Bells*.
- The awesome warning about dreadful judgement that awaits everyone, as in the First Symphony.
- The sinister, mocking side of mortality, as in the *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*. Rachmaninoff himself told Mikhail Fokine that 'all the variations on *Dies Irae* represent the Evil Spirit'.⁸¹
- The fear of what may come after death, the fear of the unknown. One of the very few people with whom Rachmaninoff occasionally held serious conversations was his friend Marietta Shaginyan. In her memoirs she described their conversation in November of 1915: 'He asked me in a very anxious and hesitant tone,

⁷⁷ Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 353.

⁷⁸ Norris, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 105.

⁷⁹ *Vospominaniya o Rakhaminove* [Reminiscences of Rachmaninoff]. Editing and Introduction by Z.A. Apetyan (Moskva, 1988), 1, pp. 8-9.

⁸⁰ Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 158.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 327.

'What is your attitude towards death, dear Re? Are you afraid of death? ... I have never wanted immortality personally. A man wears out, grows old, under old age he grows fed up with himself. I have grown fed up with myself even before old age. But if there is something beyond, then it is terrifying'. He immediately became rather pale and his face began to tremble.... It was precisely the uncertainty of death that affected him'.⁸²

Apart from the death theme, there is also admiration of life in Rachmaninoff's music. It is beyond doubt that the composer loved and enjoyed life greatly. It is well known how much Rachmaninoff admired the beauty of nature, how much he loved children (and children liked him⁸³), animals, games, fast riding in his 'Loreley' car, poetry, art and pretty women (at the same time, as Marietta Shaginyan put it, 'being very chaste'⁸⁴). He had a wonderful sense of humour and was a great anecdote-teller.⁸⁵

This joy was his personal joy and he always expressed it in music with his 'individual' melodies which may have been influenced by Russian folk or church material but were not a chant formula like *Dies Irae*. It must be that the death theme of his music expressed not just his feelings and fears but the concern of the whole of humanity, the eternal grief, not just Russian, but universal – and that is why he used the chant that came from ages ago, not the creation of an individual but the most profound expression of human soul experience.⁸⁶ Certainly contemporaries saw, as Taneev put it, 'the noble tragedy' of the composer and that it was more than just his own. 'His music is... songs full of sadness which our grandmothers used to sing... His sorrow is serious and concealed, albeit stylish ... Some kind of

⁸² *Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove*, pp. 140-144.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 182.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 117.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Gleb Grakov finds that the four note motif of *Dies Irae* so frequently used by Rachmaninoff closely reminds traditional Russian *prichety* – little weeping tunes over the departed and also the four notes of the bell-ringing during the Lent ('Muzykal'noe', pp. 158-159). Thus, *Dies Irae* is on the one hand universal Catholic formula, on the other hand it is very close to native Russian feelings. Obviously, Rachmaninoff chose the chant to convey his message and at that time the chant had a fixed meaning in secular music. On the other hand, the composer could have used it to such extent only because he liked the tune. Could it be that *Dies Irae* was a disguised Russian *prichet* for him? Perhaps, again we deal with the work of the sub-consciousness, according to Joseph Yasser.

austere, ancient vision incomprehensible to the mind burdens his individuality ... he is profoundly human', wrote Yakovlev.⁸⁷ Shaginyan conceived Rachmaninoff's music as 'modern realisation of contemporary society, the search of the contemporary man'.⁸⁸ 'In Rachmaninoff's art not only music is fighting for itself, but a human personality (*lichnost*) defends itself', wrote Marietta.⁸⁹ Asafiev called Rachmaninoff's music 'confession of mankind'.⁹⁰

Is there any consolation and salvation from the *Dies Irae* reality that Rachmaninoff felt so strongly? Presenting the *Znamenny* chant Alleluia in the finale of his last work the composer offers us his discovery. Again, it is not an individual 'Ode to Joy' tune, it is an ancient chant. It is not just Rachmaninoff's invention, but the experience of many people. The chant-like material in Rachmaninoff's music may represent:

- sorrow, compassion, grief, penitence – the pain of humanity, as in the Third Symphony;
- acceptance of reality, peaceful wisdom, courage in going through life, as in the Third Piano Concerto;
- victorious triumph over death and evil, as in *The Symphonic Dances*.

Musicologists emphasise that the young Rachmaninoff was not a church man, and his attitude to religion was lukewarm. There is one thing to remember: it was normal behaviour for Russian intelligentsia in those days; going to church would have been found 'not cool' and most queer for a young man. But people do change, and a change in Rachmaninoff's case cannot be denied.⁹¹ Soviet musicologists, of course, insisted that the composer's attention to church music and the chants 'was not a religious search but the search for nationality'.⁹² However, there are facts that prove that Rachmaninoff in his later years, though not a regular church-goer, was certainly a man of Christian faith.

Alexander Goldenveyzer, his friend from student days remembered: 'I have not heard from Rachmaninoff about his faith and did not notice him going to church but when every evening he said good-bye to his much

⁸⁷ V. Yakovlev, 'S.V. Rachmaninov', in *Russians on Russian Music*, ed. Campbell, p. 185.

⁸⁸ *Molodye gody Rakhmaninova*, p. 154.

⁸⁹ Rakhmaninov, *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 1, p. 16.

⁹⁰ B.V. Asafiev, *Izbrannye Trudy* [Selected Works] (Moskva, 1954), 2, p. 295.

⁹¹ Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 218.

⁹² *Molodye gody Rakhmaninova*, p. 152.

beloved daughters he always carefully crossed them'.⁹³ He arranged his burial in the Orthodox Church well in advance (requesting *Nunc Dimitis* from his *Vigil* to be sung), most importantly he made his confession, received Holy Communion and died as a Christian leaving no doubts about his beliefs. He helped others so much that a worker in the Central Moscow Post office once exclaimed: 'Who is this Rachmaninoff? Half of Moscow seems to receive parcels from him'.⁹⁴ The composer also was a very caring god-father for several children. Irina Shalyapina, one of his god-daughters, reported that he sent her cards and spent time with her: 'He did not teach me anything spiritual. But when I listen to his music the best qualities of my soul are waking up'.⁹⁵

'An artist can not be a moralist!' Rachmaninoff once said to Alfred Swan.⁹⁶ He did not want to teach and to preach. Yet Rachmaninoff certainly cultivated the spiritual dimension of his music. Very revealing is his letter of 1939 to Libling about futurism in music: 'They are creating in the spirit of the time. They do not care for the spiritual dimension...'.⁹⁷ This *dukhovnaya storona* (spiritual dimension) was all important for him. 'Music should bring relief. It should rehabilitate minds and souls... Music cannot be just colour and rhythm...', as Rachmaninoff put it.⁹⁸ As Oscar Riesemann said, Rachmaninoff's music was 'the consequence of his genuine spiritual attitude towards life'.⁹⁹

One cannot but agree with the view that many Russian musicians 'treat music as something more than just music; it is a means to express something spiritual ... in Russia we have never had an art for the sake of art'.¹⁰⁰ It is certainly true in the case of Rachmaninoff. 'Every nation has its own mission: Greece developed an idea of beauty, of perfection; Rome created the concept of law. Israel and Russia are dealing with the understanding of God', said the composer Vladimir Martynov, expressing the view of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Vladimir Solovyov and other Russian thinkers.¹⁰¹

⁹³ *Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove*, p. 405.

⁹⁴ Nikitin, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 134.

⁹⁵ Rakhmaninov, *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 1, p. 182.

⁹⁶ *Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove*, p. 184; Alfred and Katherine Swan, 'Rachmaninoff: Personal Reminiscences', pp. 1-19.

⁹⁷ Rakhmaninov, *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 3, p. 171.

⁹⁸ Interview for *New York Times* in Haylock, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 75.

⁹⁹ Von Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections*, p. 210.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Ivashkin, 'The Paradox of Russian Non-Liberty', *The Musical Quarterly*, 76 (1992), 4, p. 545.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 547.

The spiritual conflicts, the struggle of Death and Evil with the Wise, Peaceful and Divine in Rachmaninoff's music are conveyed with the help of the chants – 'his favourite compositional devices'.¹⁰² The traditional chants became Rachmaninoff's multipurpose symbolic language.¹⁰³

APPENDIX I: MUSICAL SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement 1

Third Concerto, opening theme. Source: Martyn, B. Op.cit.P.211

Allegro ma non tanto

p

The chant from Kiev area "Thy tomb, O Savior, solders guarding". (Source: Ibid)

¹⁰² Pallaver, 'Rachmaninoff', p. 29.

¹⁰³ Note on Translation and Transliteration

Translations from Russian are made by the author, unless otherwise indicated. In some cases a Russian expression cannot be matched precisely with one in English; on several such occasions the original Russian word is provided, e.g. spiritual side – *dukhovnaya storona*, or personality – *lichnost*. Terms of the Orthodox Church (e.g. *Znamenny*) which cannot be translated are italicised and explained in the Appendix 'Terminology of the Orthodox Church'. *Rospev* (or *raspev*) in Russian is translated as 'chant', as the common definition of *rospev* corresponds to the concept of chant in Western music history. In most cases, the British Standards Institution (BSI) system of transliteration has been used. Exceptions have been made when standard English-language renderings of names have become commonly accepted, e.g. Rachmaninoff (although Rakhmaninov in the Bibliography) and Tchaikovsky. Certain letters with diacritics and accents, which appear in the standard BSI system (e.g. -ë are used without diacritics and accents here. The apostrophe (') for the soft sign (ъ) is used only in the bibliography. The endings – ый/ – ий are rendered as -y.

Supplement 2

Rachmaninoff *The Bells* (Source: Norris, G. Op.cit. P.154)

First Movement *Meno Mosso. Mafestoso.*



The *Dies Irae* Hymn ("Day of wrath and terror looming! Heaven and earth to ash consuming...")



Di - es i - rae, di - es il - la, Sol - vet sae - clam in fa - vil - la

APPENDIX II: TERMINOLOGY OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Terminology of the Orthodox Church in English and European languages has been discussed and defined by Johann Gardner and Vladimir Morosan.¹⁰⁴ ‘Phonetic’ terminology (i.e. close to Russian pronunciation), e.g. *Irmology* (instead of *Heirmologion*, according to Gardner), is also in wide use in English-speaking Orthodox churches.¹⁰⁵ Both terms are introduced here.

Services of the Orthodox Church

1. Vespers, 2. Compline, 3. Nocturn, 4. Matins, 5. First Hour, 6. Third Hour, 7. Sixth Hour, 8. Divine Liturgy, 9. Ninth Hour.

The usual practise in the Russian Church is to combine Vespers, Matins and First Hour into All-Night Vigil (*Vsenoshchnoe Bdenie*). The Vigil and the Liturgy are the two most common services. Also common are Commemoration of the Departed (*Panikhida*) and the Service of Thanksgiving

¹⁰⁴ Johann von Gardner, *Russian Church Singing. Vol. I: Orthodox Worship and Hymnography*. Translated by Vladimir Morosan (New York, 1980), see esp. the Chapter ‘Types of Hymns’ (pp. 34-53).

¹⁰⁵ *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*. Compiled, translated and arranged from the old Church-Slavonic Books of the Russian Church and collated with the Service books of the Greek Church by Isabel Florence Hapgood., 5th edition (New Jersey, 1975).

and Fervent Supplication (*Moleben*). Only hours are read, all other services are sung, according to *Typikon*, which defines the order of worship.

The All-Night Vigil includes, among other hymns, the opening psalms ('Bless the Lord' and 'Blessed is the man'), the early Christian hymn 'Gentle Light' ('*Svete Tikhyy*'), *Polyeleos* (psalms 135-136, sung during the anointment with oil), the nine odes of the Canon (which are read but each is preceded and followed by a sung ode, *irmos*), the *Great Doxology* (*Velikoe Slavoslovie*) etc.

The Liturgy includes litanies (*yekteniyas*), *antiphons* (singing of psalms), *trisagion* ('Holy God' sung thrice), *troparions* and *kontakions* of the day, *prokimenon*, reading from Epistles and Gospel, etc.; the three hymns 'Cherubic Hymn', 'Mercy of Peace' and 'It is meet and right' are sung in the second half of the Liturgy during the consecration of Holy Gifts and are called the *Eucharistic Canon*.

Liturgy Books of the Orthodox Church

Obikhod – unchangeable common hymns for Vespers, Matins and Liturgy (book of the Ordinary); the word (*Obikhodny rospev*) also can mean common chants: Kievan, Bulgarian, Greek (see Canonical Singing of the Orthodox Church).

Oktoechos (*Oktoikh*, or *Osmoglasnik*) – a cycle of eight tones (*glas*) which include melodies and sacred texts; the tone used changes every week (the melodies are also used when singing texts proper to feasts).

Festal Menaion (*Prazdnichnaya Mineya*) – containing hymns for non-movable feasts, e.g. the twelve great feasts commemorating the life of Christ, commemoration of saints etc.

Lenten Triodion (*Postnaya Triod*): hymns for Great Lent.

Pentecostarion (*Tsvetnaya Triod*): hymns for Easter tide.

Heirmologion (*Irmology*): contains the *heirmos* (*irmos*) of all canons for Matins.

Typikon: explains the order of services.

Canonical Singing of the Russian Church

Canonical singing implies melodies from official liturgical singing-books, i.e. ancient manuscripts written in staff-less notation or printed books with staff notation published by the Holy Synod; whether unison, or a polyphonic setting, is used is equally valid, so long as original canonical melody

is maintained.¹⁰⁶ The *corpus melodiarum* of the Russian church consisted of several chants (*rospevy*): ancient (*Znamenny*, *Kondokarny*, *Putevoy*, *Demestvenny* and etc.) and more modern chants (*Kievan*, *Greek*, and *Bulgarian*) which developed from their older predecessors.¹⁰⁷ Each chant is characterised by its special melodic turns, *popevki*, and by rules of their combinations.

Ancient chants were written in staff-less notation by means of original neumes, known as *kryuki*, *znamyona*, or *stolpy*. The neumatic notation was gradually replaced by stave square notation in the second half of the 17th century; this neumatic notation is still used by Old-Believers. *Azbuka* is an alphabet of neumes.

Znamenny, the most ancient and complete chant of the Russian Church, dates possibly from the 10th -11th centuries. It is ‘a type of music unlike anything else whether in the Middle Ages or in more modern music’,¹⁰⁸ in which the melodies are inextricably tied to the texts. The term *Znamenny* indicated the way the chant was written down (by means of *znamyona* neumes).

Kievan chant, a descendant of *Znamenny*, came from the south of Russia and Ukraine in the 17th century, is the most widely used common chant. Unlike *Znamenny*, Kievan chant sometimes encounters repetitions of words and phrases.

Bulgarian chant does not have connections with Bulgarian singing, but came from Southern Russia and Ukraine in the 17th century. In marked difference from ancient chants it contains symmetrical rhythms and phrase structures. It is not fully developed, i.e. does not contain melodies for all categories of hymns.

Greek chant does not have close connections with Greek singing, but may have been influenced by Greek or Romanian singing. It came from Southern Russia in the 17th century. In marked difference from ancient chants, it contains symmetrical rhythms and phrase structures; it is not fully developed, i.e. it does not contain melodies for all categories of hymns.

The ‘foreign’ names (Greek, Bulgarian), as Vladimir Morosan writes, were supposed ‘to give a mark of legitimacy’ to new melodies.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Von Gardner, *Russian Church Singing*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁷ V. Morosan, *One Thousand Years of Russian Church Music 988-1988* (Washington D.C., 1991), pp. 725-747.

¹⁰⁸ A. Swan, *Russian Music and its Sources in Chant and Folk-Song* (New York, 1973), pp. 37-38.

¹⁰⁹ Morosan, *Russian Church Music*, pp. 725-747.

Hymns of the Orthodox Church

Troparion (or tropar), kontakion (or kondak), stikhira, prokimenon (or prokimen), heirmos (irmos), etc. These terms denote:

- the purpose of the text, e.g. highlighting the meaning and significance of the feast (troparion, kontakion), commenting and telling the story (*stikhira*), introducing readings from Epistles or Gospel (*prokimen*);
- the place, where this text is to be sung or read during the service.

Most of the hymns are sung according to certain melodic patterns – *glas*, or tones. A few hymns (e.g. ‘Cherubic Hymn’, ‘Mercy of Peace’) have fixed, non-*glas* tunes.

A Glass (a tone) is a collection of texts and melodies. There are eight such collections; each of them dominates services for a week, thus creating a cycle of eight tones. Tones are presented in the book of *Oktoechos* (Greek term) or *Osmoglasnik* (Slavonic term). Every tone has four melodies (*napevy*) for singing: 1. *stikhira*; 2. *troparion*; 3. *irmos*; 4. *prokimen*. All hymns follow one of the four models.

In their turn, *napevy* consist of several original little motives – *popevki* that are repeated inside the *napev*.

Popevki – consistent melodic turns, formulae which ‘serve as building blocks’¹¹⁰ for different tones. Each tone is distinguished by certain *popevki* and the ways they are combined.

Podgoloski – a kind of polyphony where the musical fabric is formed from the fundamental voice and all accompanying voices are themselves variants of the basic melody. *Podgoloski* are used in folk music and in professional compositions including sacred ones, modelled on folklore.

Abstract

This article explores the importance that the Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff, attached to traditional Christian chants: the Latin *Dies Irae* and the chants of the Russian Orthodox Church. No other composer in European music has used the traditional chants (particularly *Dies Irae*) to such an extent as Rachmaninoff.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

The author based her research on a wide range of sources: Rachmaninoff's letters and interviews; contemporaries' and relatives' memoires; and articles on his music. The musical sources are used to draw conclusions about the personal and musical temperament of the composer.

For Rachmaninoff, the *dukhovnaya storona* (spiritual dimension) of music was always of great importance. His music was an expression of his philosophy of life and the chants were used as idiosyncratic devices to help transmit his message. The fear of death and the vanity of life, the grief and pain of humanity, the struggle of good and evil, and the victorious triumph of Light over death – all these messages of Rachmaninoff's music can be understood by listeners so much better once one can see the meaning of the chants for the composer and the reasons for his extensive use of chant like material.