

# About the Program

BY DR. GORDON PAINE

For forty years (1956–1996) Peter Hallock (b. 1924) served as organist/choirmaster at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle. A gifted composer, he wrote a great deal of music for the services there, much of which takes advantage of the magnificent organ he obtained for the cathedral.

In *Exsultate Deo* (1988) Hallock has created an original biblical libretto by excerpting sentences and phrases from Psalms 81, 68, 149, and 150 and reassembling them into a new whole. The Latin is often presented first and then the same text is set again, this time in English, but to different music.

The singing is preceded by what one might interpret as an evocation of God's omnipresence, mystery, and strength, a sustained low C in the organ pedal that supports increasingly dense and foreboding harmonies. After a dramatic climax, only the pure, silvery sound of the vibraphone remains, clearing the stage for the ebullient choral "Sing joyfully to God!" This is introduced by the organ, celeste, and most importantly, the harp, which serves throughout as a bridge between sections.

Hallock's instrumentation comes straight from Psalm 81, which commands one instrument after another to join in God's praise: When the drum is called upon, the tom-tom answers, and the tambourine obeys the order to "bring forth the taboret." The harp and cymbals then answer for themselves, and the organ's trumpet responds to the call to "blow the trumpet in the new moon."

In the more contemplative middle section, the choir's Latin text is translated by the three soloists one after the other, with arch-shaped harp cadenzas punctuating their sentences. The final harp passage leads to the closing "alleluia." The celeste and vibraphone quietly introduce its vigorous, unyielding triple rhythm, which undergirds a glorious, extended crescendo.

Londoner Tarik O'Regan (b. 1978), a deservedly rising star in the world of composition, divides his time between London and New York. The majority of his nearly 100 works to date are for chorus. He composed the *Dorchester Canticles* in 2004 on commission from the Bournemouth (England) Sinfonietta Choir.

The work consists of two Latin anthems, settings of Psalms 98 and 67 respectively. They can be performed separately, but because of a return in the latter to music from the former, they work perfectly as a unit.

Interestingly, like Hallock's *Exsultate Deo*, "Cantate Domino" is also introduced by a sustained low C in the organ pedal. The opening of the Psalm entreats the faithful to "sing unto the Lord a new song," and that is precisely what O'Regan does. His harmonic language is contemporary, fluid and fluent, as are his lively, crystalline rhythms and the colorful, effortless-sounding use of his instruments. From time to time, one can hear echoes of Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, which might be expected since O'Regan chose his instrumentation so that his work might be paired with Bernstein's.

"Deus misereatur nostri" (God Be Merciful unto Us) starts off more soberly, as befits such a prayer. O'Regan divides phrases between the chorus and a tenor soloist, who has the principal part: With the words "let the people praise thee," the chorus becomes nearly silent and its text imperceptible, like a monastic choir chanting in the distance. The next sentence ("God shall bless us ...") is treated as a grand declamatory block of biting harmony, while what follows combines the continuation of the text ("for he hath done marvelous things...") with both music and words from the beginning of "Cantate Domino." The incisively glorious doxology comes out of nowhere with a blazingly fast organ figuration that drives forward nonstop to the very end.

No one knows what inspired Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943) to compose the *All-Night Vigil*, which he wrote in just two weeks early in 1915. At first it seems odd that he chose to set this liturgical text – after all, he was not particularly religious, and the demands of the work made it unlikely that it would actually be used in the liturgy. But Russia and the state Russian Orthodox Church were synonymous, the all-night vigil was one of its most important services, and Rachmaninov was a proud Russian. Perhaps composing the *All-Night Vigil* was an act of patriotism, love, and loyalty that sprang from the ancestral soul.

By the dawn of 1915 Russia was already mired in World War I and working to finance its defense. The income from the March premiere of the *All-Night Vigil* went in part to this end, as did the receipts from five subsequent performances.

Two years later the war was still raging, revolution had begun in Russia, and chaos reigned. The Czar – indeed, the entire concept of monarchy, and with it the state church – was under attack by the Bolsheviks. By the end of the year Russia was unsafe for people of means, the Rachmaninov country estate had been destroyed, and the family had fled their homeland, never to return. Two years later the Communists ruled, and the Czar lay in an unmarked grave. The Russian Orthodox Church was but an echo of the past, and musical composition had become an adjunct to state propaganda.

Without knowing it, Rachmaninov had written the last great musical work for the Orthodox church – arguably the most splendid in its history.

An "All-Night Vigil," a combination of the three services of Vespers, Matins, and "The First Hour," may be held on Sabbath eve in monastic environments throughout the year, but its most important celebration is on Easter eve. It is also observed



in regular churches, but in a drastically abbreviated form necessitated by the nine hours required for the full service.

Rachmaninov's first six movements are excerpts from Vespers, the next six are drawn from Matins, and the final three come from "The First Hour." Though the composer set only a few of the Vigil's texts, he included the beginning and ending of both Vespers and Matins and set everything in liturgical order. Why he chose the passages he did is uncertain, but since the composition had to stand

on its own as a musical work, he probably chose his texts accordingly. This can be seen most clearly in the selections from "The First Hour" (nos. 13–15), a service of humility and repentance: Rachmaninov chose three of the most uplifting passages, presumably to provide a joyous ending.

A few observations on the music may be helpful.

Because musical instruments were not permitted in the Russian Orthodox serv-

ice, the entire *All-Night Vigil* is unaccompanied. It is also set entirely in the ancient language of Church Slavonic. The work is thus an extraordinary challenge for a choir and a feat of both vocal and linguistic endurance.

Rachmaninov himself faced a challenge: how to provide a depth of musical interest and variety for an hour using just voices? His solution was to use the choir as he would an orchestra. Nominally, he set the Vigil for four voice parts—soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. But he sometimes uses as few as three, and on one occasion he expands the number of parts to eleven. By flexibly adjusting the number of parts and carefully choosing the desired sonorities, he created an orchestration of voices, the beauty of which is rivaled by few other choral works.

One of the most famous features of the Vigil is the writing for the basses. In an orchestra, the string basses provide a deep, broad foundation, and Rachmaninov sought a similar effect in several places in the Vigil. No. 5 provided an especially wonderful pictorial opportunity. The text (Luke 2:29–32) consists of a prayer by Simeon, an old man who asks God to take him because he has finally seen the Christ with his own eyes. In the very last measure, in symbolism of Simeon's death, the lowest of the divided bass parts descends an octave-long scale to low B-flat, a note that most basses can only imagine. When the man who was to conduct the premiere heard the composer play this passage, he asked, "Now where on earth are we to find such basses? They are as rare as asparagus at Christmas!" Rachmaninov later commented, "Nevertheless, he did find them. I knew the voices of my countrymen." Rachmaninov loved this movement so much that he requested it to be sung at his funeral.