The Cantata Singers, led by David Hoose (in an undated photo), had their stamina and flexibility tested by Rachmaninoff's "All-Night Vigil."

By Matthew Guerrieri | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT  FEBRUARY 02, 2015
WELLESLEY — Sergei Rachmaninoff was not much of a churchgoer, but he once got into an argument about religion with Charlie Chaplin. The agnostic actor insisted that doctrine was incompatible with art, since “art is a feeling more than a belief.” “So is religion,” Rachmaninoff responded.

On Saturday, Rachmaninoff’s perhaps unorthodox but deeply-felt sense of Russian Orthodox faith was given estimable expression by the Cantata Singers and conductor David Hoose, performing the composer’s 1915 “All-Night Vigil” at Wellesley College’s Houghton Chapel. Neither acquiescing to the liturgy nor simply appropriating it, Rachmaninoff instead refracted the ritual through his own Romantic style while refracting that style through the measured progression of the ritual. From vespers to matins — allegorical dusk to dawn — the “All-Night Vigil” compresses the hours, but still marks them in a steady tread.

Even in such abbreviation — about an hour of music — the “Vigil” is a test of the performers’ stamina and flexibility. Rachmaninoff retained the de rigueur, unaccompanied nature of Orthodox singing, but treated the voices as a quasi-orchestral resource. The four-part choir is further divided and redivided; the score is fueled by wide, disparate contrasts: sepulchrally low basses, ethereally high sopranos, trumpeting tenors, and oratorical altos, singled out, paired off, gathered together in one ear-grabbing permutation after another.

Solo parts (ably filled by alto Kim Leeds, tenor Stephen Williams, and bass Shelby Condray for this performance) turn up in the first third of the piece, but the massed voices are the real, collective celebrant. The group led the service with some beautiful singing: long-spooling lines sustained, climaxes buzzing and bright, Russian diction properly redolent. Hoose shaped the movements with understated deftness, rounded off phrases with a precise gentleness, musical and divine grace mirroring each other.

One of the work’s most intriguing features, and one well-realized on Saturday, is its often paradoxical sense of immediacy and formality. Even as the music’s bigger moments soared — the final verse of the “Magnificat,” or the insistent grandeur of the pleas for mercy in the Great Doxology, or the simple but sheer and unbridled splendor of the Orthodox “Hail Mary” — the overall effect remained austere. The liturgical chant that underpins so much of the score also informs its mood: rhythmically asymmetrical
but flowing, harmonically rich but restrained, the praise unhurried but inexorable. The “All-Night Vigil” sets down the higher artistic truth of Rachmaninoff’s religious feeling, a quest after timeless, deliberate ecstasies.

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