

The Sacred Spirit of Russia - Christmas Liturgy from a Russian Cathedral (2014)



FROM THE MATINS SERVICE 01 *The Great Doxology No.2, Op.57* – Alexander Kastalsky (1856-1926) 7:38

FROM THE LITURGY OF THE WORD 02 *Bless the Lord, O My Soul (Liturgy, Op. 37, No. 2)* – Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859-1935) 2:40

03 *Glory ... / Only Begotten Son (Liturgy No.2, Op. 29, No. 2)* – Alexander Gretchaninov (1864-1956) 2:35

04 *The Beatitudes* – Vladimir Martynov (1946-) 5:16

05 *Come, Let Us Worship, Op. 8, No. 2* – Pavel Tchesnokov (1877-1944) 1:47

06 *Christmas Troparion (Inexpressible Wonder, No. 4)* – Georgi Sviridov (1915-1998) 1:23

07 *Today the Virgin, Op. 7b (Znamenny Chant)* – Alexander Kastalsky 1:54

08 *As Many Have Been Baptized, Op. 18c (Znamenny Chant)* – Alexander Kastalsky 2:14

FROM THE LITURGY OF THE FAITHFUL

09 *Cherubic Hymn, Op. 7, No. 1* – Pavel Tchesnokov 4:35

10 *The Creed (Liturgy No. 2, Op. 29, No. 8)* – Alexander Gretchaninov 4:30

11 *A Mercy of Peace (Znamenny Chant), Op. 6* – Alexander Kastalsky 7:44

12 *Hymn to the Mother of God for the Nativity – Znamenny Chant* 2:28

13 *Our Father (Liturgy No.2, Op. 29, No. 11)* – Alexander Gretchaninov 4:43

14 *Praise the Lord from the Heavens (Liturgy, Op. 42, No. 9)* – Pavel Tchesnokov 2:07

SACRED CONCERTOS

15 *A Wondrous Birth (A Wondrous Birth, No. 7)* – Georgi Sviridov 3:57

16 *We Should Choose to Love Silence (Concerto for the Nativity of Christ)* – Andrei Ilyashenko (1884-1954) 3:03

17 *Now the Powers of Heaven (Passion Week, Op. 58, No. 6)* – Alexander Gretchaninov 5:08

18 *Do Not Cast Me Off in My Old Age, Op. 40, No. 5* – Pavel Tchesnokov 4:48

CLOSING OF THE LITURGY

19 *Let Our Mouths Be Filled (Liturgy, Op. 31, No. 18)* – Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) 4:31

20 *Blessed Be the Name of the Lord (Liturgy, Op. 31, No. 19)* – Sergei Rachmaninov 0:46

21 *Preserve, O Lord, for Many Years (Liturgy, Op. 79)* – Alexander Gretchaninov 1:05

22 *Our Father – Nikolai Kedrov, Sr. (1871-1940)* 2:57

Conspirare (Ensemble) Glenn Miller - basso profundo (#18) Craig Hella Johnson - conductor

Time was when this repertoire was the preserve of Russian choirs. No more; one only has to sample the richly idiomatic singing of the Phoenix Bach Choir and Kansas City Chorale to know

that American ensembles are now as accomplished as their Eastern rivals (review). Conspirare, founded in Austin, Texas, is no exception; under musical director Craig Hella Johnson they've recorded a number of choral collections, which are notable for their eclecticism and polish. Indeed, Simon Thompson and John Quinn both wrote glowingly of their Barber disc. I came across this new release quite by accident, and soon realised it demanded a review.

The thousand-year-old Orthodox tradition has developed and endured, and it's this vein that the 'New Russian Choral School' tapped into in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I'm indebted to Vladimir Morosan for his scrupulously annotated but very readable booklet essay, which delves into the music of this important church festival; I particularly relish - and respond to - its unique amalgam of worship and theatre. This recording attempts to recreate a typical Orthodox Christmas service, beginning with what is known as The Great Doxology. From the outset Conspirare sing with thrilling weight and accuracy; also, the acoustic of this Texas church provides a near-ideal performing space for the feast of antiphons, hymns and prayers that follows.

Especially impressive in this Alexander Kastalsky opener is the fine choral tapestry, woven from the most luminous threads. The sense of occasion - so important in this music - is palpable, and the solidity and blend of these singers is just remarkable. As for the texts of the ensuing Liturgy of the Word it's as if they are lit from within by a steady, ancient light. Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov's 'Bless the Lord, O My Soul' really captures that air of something vast and venerable, while Alexander Tikhonovich Grechaninov's 'Glory ... / Only Begotten Son' brings mounting fervour to the mix. In contrast the sopranos that crown Vladimir Martynov's Beatitudes are wonderfully elevated and ethereal; indeed, their celestial tones seem to hang, as if suspended, high above the gently rocking choir.

This is just one of the many musical and spiritual epiphanies on this disc; the two Kastalsky contributions that bring The Liturgy of the Word to a close may be a little less inspired, but Conspirare imbue them with a simple, heartfelt conviction that's very hard to resist. Next up is The Liturgy of the Faithful, which opens with Pavel Chesnokov's aptly named 'Cherubic Hymn'. Happily it's all captured in sound of great depth and detail; also, the music's dynamic shifts and shadings are managed with rare aplomb. Such a sense of scale and space is vital, and both are here in abundance. As for the quiet, pliable chant of Grechaninov's setting of the The Creed it's another of those breath-stopping moments where all artifice falls away and one is left trembling on the brink of sublimity.

The lightish male soloists may not be as steady or as deep-chested as their Russian counterparts, but they're suitably plangent in the chants of Kastalsky's 'A Mercy of Peace' and

'Hymn to the Mother of God on the Nativity'. True, these settings aren't all memorable, but that matters little when they're sung with such finesse and feeling. And just when one's concentration might waver Alexander Tikhonovich returns with a radiant 'Our Father' that calms the heart and cossets the soul.

Some of The Sacred Concertos aren't so engaging either, although the ecstatic 'Hallelujahs' of Georgi Sviridov's 'Wondrous Birth' are incisively sung. There are no such caveats about Grechaninov's 'Now the Powers of Heaven' - familiar from his Passion Week - which combines low-end gravitas with high-lying splendour. Here Conspirare yield little, if anything, to the Phoenix and Kansas choirs. Yes, a slightly darker, weightier sound wouldn't go amiss, but then Conspirare's diction is excellent and their delivery is impeccable throughout. Glenn Miller's basso profundo is certainly dark enough in Chesnokov's 'Do Not Cast Me Off In My Old Age', which at times has the drowsy cadences of Yeats's lovely lines: 'When you are old and grey and full of sleep / And nodding by the fire...'.

The service ends with The Closing of the Liturgy; Rachmaninov's 'Let Our Mouths Be Filled' is dignified, and the stratospheric voices of 'Blessed Be the Name of the Lord' ring with almost terrifying fervour. The undisputed star of this disc must be Grechaninov, whose gorgeous 'Preserve, O Lord, For Many Years' shines with such a pure, inspiring light. Nikolai Kedrov Sr's 'Our Father' is pretty marvellous too; its air of quiet certainty is entirely fitting at this juncture and, much moved, I sat in silence long after the last 'Amen' had faded.

One of the pleasures of reviewing is discovering new music and music-makers; for me that's particularly true of a cappella collections such as this. I'm simply awed by the standard of choral singing today, whether it be from Kiev, Kansas or all points in between. As for Craig Hella Johnson he's certainly turned Conspirare into a top-notch ensemble; that makes them a good fit for Harmonia Mundi, whose high production values are as impressive as ever.

Conspirare breathe new life into this repertoire; a joy from start to finish. ---Dan Morgan,
musicweb-international.com

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