

The Rachmaninov concert 19 May 2012, Guildford Cathedral

Piano Concerto No 2 (Francis Potts), Vespers, The Bells

The Brandenburg Sinfonia. Vivace Chorus

Conductor: Jeremy Backhouse

An all Rachmaninov programme might seem over the top - cream on ice cream. But the programme was compiled to give us a good range of Rachmaninov's work and – as the excellent pre-concert talk by Francis Potts pointed out – there is a great diversity in his oeuvre. There is much more than gloominess, and lyrical melancholy. Rachmaninov had good reason to eschew cheerfulness as a result of catastrophic reviews of some of his early works and the struggle to live outside Russia following the revolution. But he could find great fun in playing with his children.

The concert opened with a selection from what is known as the Vespers (a liturgical work). These demonstrate a different side of Rachmaninov than the lyrical rhapsody. These are sung without accompaniment and depend entirely on the skill of the choir. The question whether to sing in Russian was resolved by allowing the beauty of the Slavic language to express both the Vespers and The Bells. The confidence with which this was done was seen in the opening of the Vespers: a very sound opening to the concert. The Vivace chorus certainly sang the Russian with confidence, even fervour, and if there were a few linguistic variations, this did not damage the overall effect.

The Vespers were marked with great chordal singing and with great dynamic control. In the resurrection Hymn there was real joy – not a common emotion for Rachmaninov's music. His work was shot with a sense of mortality with human transience which is seen both in the Vespers and The Bells. According to Potts in his talk, Rachmaninov -- like Holst and Vaughan Williams -- wrote religious music while being somewhat outside any religious faith.

After a serious breakdown Rachmaninov returned to musical faith with the well known second Piano Concerto. The soloist, Francis Potts, gave everything to this much loved piece. He had said in his talk that Rachmaninov could be astringent as well as rapturous and he showed this in his confident, steady opening. Potts is a man who can create atmosphere with his fingertips. And later when all was unleashed we could allow our hearts to throb in sympathy with the resounding beat. The Brandenburg Sinfonia were splendid throughout, my only criticism being that the brass sometimes drowned the piano.

The concluding cantata, The Bells, shows Rachmaninov in dramatic vein. The chorus seemed to flourish in depicting the drama. The soprano, Sara Lian Owen had a ringing tone and the baritone, Gareth Brynmor John, was especially effective as a rich and expressive singer. The chorus excelled in the sheer excitement of The Loud Alarum Bells and the atmospheric The Mournful Iron Bells. Jeremy Backhouse was able both to sustain fine control and yet allow the music to happen.

So it cannot be doubted what diversity can be found in Rachmaninov's work and the all Rachmaninov evening was a thorough-going success.

Jim Herrick