

An Analysis of Sergei Rachmaninov's  
*All-Night Vigil*  
“Now Let Thy Servant Depart”

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### Introduction

In the years just prior to 1915, Sergei Rachmaninov toured the United States, Austria, and Poland. He returned to Russia just before the enforcement of traveling restrictions due to the Great War. In only two weeks in early 1915 (almost thirty years before his death), he completed his *All-Night Vigil*, now considered a masterpiece of choral literature. This was the last of a few sacred settings in a small body of choral works, and Rachmaninov dedicated it to the memory of Stepan Vasilyevich Smolensky, the respected church music historian, who had introduced him to Orthodox sacred music.

In the Russian Orthodox tradition, the *All-Night Vigil* is

the Saturday-evening service preceding major feast days and includes Vespers (or Great Compline, depending on the occasion), Matins, and the First Hour. Originally, the All-Night Vigil stretched throughout the night, hence its title; however, most modern parishes simply use the Nunc Dimittis, from the Vespers service, as one of the last readings before lying down to sleep.

Also called the “Canticle of Simeon,” the Nunc Dimittis [Now Let Thy Servant Depart] originates in Luke 2:29–32 of the New Testament. This prayer to “depart in peace” correlates with a tranquil death—a serene decline—an idea musically represented in this movement. Table 1 shows the prayer, in Church Slavonic, along with its translation.

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Table 1

## Text and Translation

Ныне отпускаеши раба Твоего  
владыко, по глаголу Твоему, с миром  
Яко видеста очи мои спасение Твоё  
еже еси уготовал  
пред лицом всех людей  
Свет во откровение языков  
и славу людей Твоих Израила

Now let Thy servant depart in peace,  
according to Thy word, O Master,  
For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation  
Which Thou hast prepared  
before the face of all peoples,  
A light of revelation for the nations  
and the glory of Thy people Israel.

The Orthodox Church set forth strict rules requiring certain movements to derive from ancient chants.<sup>1</sup> Setting the Nunc Dimittis requires composers to base the melody on Kievan chant, a simplified Ukrainian variant of Znamenny chant. This article explores Rachmaninov's methods for creating a powerful, multi-voiced structure on the basis of these melodic phrases.

The composer evokes the sense of descent associated with the prayer in a tight fabric woven from a handful of devices—melodic and harmonic—that, based on the

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# “Now Let Thy Servant Depart”



interval of a third, interact to reinforce the movement's pitch center of B<sup>b</sup>. Rachmaninov remarked after completing the *All-Night Vigil*: “My favorite number in the work...is the fifth canticle, ‘Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace’ [Luke 2:29]. I should like this sung at my funeral.”<sup>2</sup>

## Form via Texture

Set for unaccompanied SATB chorus and tenor soloist, this movement exhibits changes in texture to delineate its formal sections, which occur according to divisions of clause and phrase in the text. Each such grammatical unit bears a unique melody, with the same cadential figure acting each time as punctuation. Broadly, the piece's form is ABA, with the text of lines four and five (see Table 1) set to B material.

Two measures into the opening material, the tenor soloist begins the first melodic

phrase, “Ныне отпушаши раба Твоего владыко” [Now let Thy servant depart in peace] against a choral backdrop of tenors and altos on an augmented version of the same text. The second melodic phrase, “по глаголу Твоему, с миром” [according to Thy word, O Master], found in measures 7 through 10, begins one tone higher than the previous phrase and its accompanying material that also begins higher in pitch. As the A material continues in measure 11, the soloist begins one tone higher yet again with the phrase, “Яко видеста очи мои спасение Твое” [for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation]. Soprano voices join at measure 11, paraphrasing the first melodic phrase to function countermelodically against the soloist. This opening A section extends gently upward with each entrance of a new melody.

The bass voice begins the B material in measure 17 on “еже еси уготовал” [which thou hast prepared]. All other choral voices

imitate this theme in polyphony. At measures 21 and 22, “пред лицом всех людей, [before the face of all peoples], all voices align homophyllabically. The soloist is absent in this unique section, which will be discussed in detail later in this article.

The melody-dominant homophony of the A material returns at measure 24, as the soprano voices deliver “Свет во откровение языков” [a light of revelation for the nations]. The soloist re-enters in measure 29 on “и славу людей Твоих Израиля” [and the glory of Thy people Israel], finishing three bars from the end. Formally, the last three measures function as a codetta; the bass voice undertakes its infamous descent into the depths, reaching a low B<sup>b</sup> to end the movement. In contrast to the opening section, the return of the A material presents an overall descent, through the use of downward shifts in the accompanying voice parts and a deepening expansion of texture.

## Cadential Figure

As mentioned, the melodies discussed find their origins in Kiev chant. As a characteristic of Kiev style, each melodic statement ends with the same cadential figure, which functions as a phrasal or sectional conclusion. This figure occurs seven times throughout the movement (Figure 1). This is the central figure and an important structural component in the piece: it ends musical phrases or sub-sections, and it generates related musical material. This linear figure spans a descending melodic third, which this analysis will show to be a structural interval in the piece. Melodically, the figure proceeds to B<sup>b</sup>, the movement's pitch center. In short, the descent from D<sup>b</sup> to B<sup>b</sup> that ends the source melodies in the piece influences motion at several other levels as well. Notice the cadential figure, al-

### A. Tenor Solo: mm. 2-6

### B. Tenor Solo: mm. 11-16

### C. Soprano: mm. 23-27

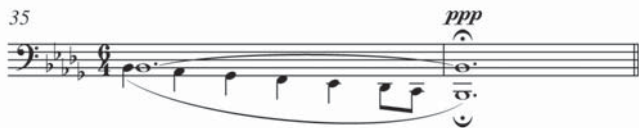
### D. Bass: mm. 17-18

Figure 1. Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, “Nunc Dimittis,” Cadential Figure Appearances.

Moscow: Muzyka, n. d. (ca. 1991) IMSL

# An Analysis of Sergei Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil*

A. Bass: mm. 35-36



B. Soprano: mm. 29-31, Strong beats



C. Tenor: mm. 7-9, Weak beats



D. Alto 2: mm. 32-34, Two times



**Figure 2.** Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, “Nunc Dimittis,”  
Cadential Figure Permutations  
Moscow: Muzyka, n. d. (ca. 1991) IMSL

beit disguised, in several non-melodic voices (Figure 2).

## Accompanying Voices: “Lying Down” Motif

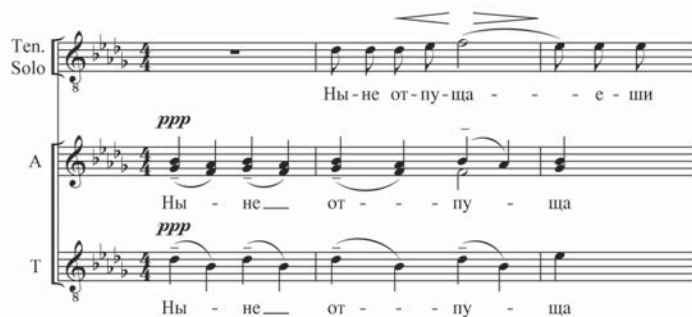
Examining this piece's melodies has revealed that their shared cadential figure supplies several organizing components that recur in various guises. Often they appear in the similarly unified accompanying material where these recurrences are found, producing a general shape of descent and reinforcing a B<sup>b</sup> pitch center. One also sees the structural importance of the third at the very outset of the accompanying material.

All harmonizing parts in the A material are generated from a single motif: a descending slur over two quarter notes in which the first note is stressed. This pervades the music with a sense of downward reaching, even as the first section's tessitura gently rises.

At the piece's opening, all three entering voices participate simultaneously in this “lying down” motif. The most prominent of these,

begins on D<sup>b</sup> and descends by a third to B<sup>b</sup> (Figure 3).

In every bar through measure 16, these voices of the chorus support the solo melody in permutations of this motif. For example, in measures 14 and 15, the tenor part G<sup>b</sup> and alto B<sup>b</sup> act as anchors, while the



**Figure 3.** Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, “Nunc Dimittis,” mm. 1 – 2.  
“Lying Down” accompanying motif  
Moscow: Muzyka, n. d. (ca. 1991) IMSL

the first alto, begins on B<sup>b</sup>, while the second alto follows in parallel thirds. The tenor part

unstressed syllables undertake a stepwise journey further downward each time from the planted notes (Figure 4).

When these voices reappear at the return of the A material in measure 24, they gradually accumulate the participation of the six other choral parts in a collective, motivic descent beginning in measure 28 to the end (Figure 5).

In the contrasting textures of the B section, this motif only sparsely appears, until it returns to undergird the climax in measure 22, which will be examined in detail later in this essay.



**Figure 4.** Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, “Nunc Dimittis,” mm. 14 – 15.  
“Lying Down” accompanying motif  
Moscow: Muzyka, n. d. (ca. 1991) IMSL

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28 *mf* *p*

Ten. Solo  
и славу людей Твоих Израи

S  
и славу людей Твоих Израи

A  
и славу людей Твоих Израи

T  
и славу людей Твоих Израи

B  
и славу людей Твоих Израи

Figure 5. Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, “Nunc Dimittis,” mm. 28 – 33.  
“Lying Down” accompanying motif  
Moscow: Muzyka, n. d. (ca. 1991) IMSL

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Send paper proposals to Dr. John Silantien, Department of Music, University of Texas at San Antonio, One UTSA Circle, San Antonio, TX 78249. Electronic submissions can be e-mailed to John.Silantien@utsa.edu. The proposal evaluation committee will consist of Dr. Silantien, Dr. David DeVenney, and Dr. N. Lee Orr. **The deadline for submissions is August 15, 2011.**

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Figure 6. Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, "Nunc Dimittis," mm. 16. Long stepwise descent, Alto

Moscow: Muzyka, n. d. (ca. 1991) IMSL



Figure 7. Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, "Nunc Dimittis," mm. 34 – 36. Long stepwise descent, Tenor 2 and Bass 2

Moscow: Muzyka, n. d. (ca. 1991) IMSL



Figure 8. Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, "Nunc Dimittis," mm. 24 – 25. Modified stepwise descent, Alto 1

Moscow: Muzyka, n. d. (ca. 1991) IMSL

### Stepwise Descent

There are also the more obvious examples of descending, linear motion, most notably the well-known stepwise descent to B<sup>b</sup> in the bass voice (see Figure 2A) that ends the piece. This descent is prefigured in measure 16 where the altos, in a chain of three "lying down" motifs, make a descent from B<sup>b</sup> (Figure 6).

Each of these long descents functions to close the A material, whether medially, as at m. 16, or terminally, in the last measures. Both of these figures connect end to end, when the descent from B<sup>b</sup> appears again in a different voicing; here the second tenors lead

into the final bass descent (Figure 7). There is also an allusion to these long descents at the return of the A material in mm. 24–25 (Figure 8).

These descending figures are concentrated expressions of the general trend in the last section of the piece. Notice the cascading descent over the entire return of the A material, beginning with F in the sopranos and falling to the final, low B<sup>b</sup> (Figure 9).

### Harmonic Relationships

This movement's avoidance of traditional Western progressions makes it harmonically

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unique. Here, harmonies revolve around the central B<sup>b</sup> pitch, relating to it and to one another by thirds.

The piece seemingly begins in G<sup>b</sup> Lydian, which is based a third away from the B<sup>b</sup>, and whose tonic triad incorporates both B<sup>b</sup> and D<sup>b</sup>, the structurally crucial pitches of the cadential figure.

A recurring B<sup>b</sup> pitch overshadows the strength of the opening G<sup>b</sup> in almost every chord through the first melodic phrase, though it is not until measure 11 that B<sup>b</sup> minor finally gains credential for its tonality.

By the close of the first A section, E<sup>b</sup> minor has taken prominence. Notice that these first three stable harmonies relate to one another by way of triadic kinship: their roots form a triad, and together they use the pivotal B<sup>b</sup> in all triadic positions—root, third, and fifth.

After more explorative harmonies in the B section, to be discussed presently, the return of the A material features familiar negotiations among the first three tonalities, finally settling conclusively in B<sup>b</sup> minor.

## Climactic Section

In the starkly contrasting middle section, Rachmaninov brings the piece to its highest point. The text of the B section reads, “еже еси уготовал, пред лицом всех людей” [which Thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples]. The solo voice is absent as is the choral fabric of

23 Свет — во от-кро-ве-ни-е я-зы — — — ков  
 Свет —  
 Свет во от-кро-ве-ни-е я-зы — — — ков  
 Свет во от-кро-ве-ни-е —

28 и — сла-ву лю-дей Тво-их Из-ра-  
 и — сла-ву лю-дей Тво-их Из-ра-  
 и — сла-ву лю-дей Тво-их Из-ра-  
 и — сла-ву лю-дей Тво-их Из-ра-  
 и — сла-ву лю-дей Тво-их Из-ра-  
 и — сла-ву лю-дей Тво-их Из-ра-

33 — — — и — ла  
 — — — и — ла  
 — — — и — ла  
 — — — и — ла  
 — — — и — ла

Figure 9. Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, “Nunc Dimittis,” mm. 23 – 36. Overall descent  
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Figure 11. Sergei Rachmaninov, *All-Night Vigil*, “Nunc Dimittis,” mm. 21 – 23. Climax

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be viewed as the root and third of the climactic  $D^b$  major triad just achieved or as the third and fifth of the  $B^b$  minor triad in which the piece began and to which it could be predicted to return. And so this single ray of “light” vibrates through four white beats of uncertainty, until the dark notes of the motivic fabric return in the altos, who slip a  $B^b$  under the hanging third to define the music’s tonal destination.

## Conclusion

Though Rachmaninov briefly highlights the text’s reference to the glory and the

light of salvation, he retains awareness of a more modern liturgical function of the Nunc Dimittis: to send people peacefully and prayerfully home to bed. Coupled with this daily “lying down” is the prayer’s reference to the final “lying down,” the death that Simeon declares he can now accept in peace, having seen the promised Jesus. In Rachmaninov’s choral texture, the community of singers, representing all believers, rejoices in receiving its shared promise of salvation for all; but it is the human experience of descent that dominates the music, for the worshippers are still on this side of the death they must first face. Taking his cue from the arc of the

Kiev chant’s cadential figure, Rachmaninov weaves a tight construction of descending gestures, making his point most palpably in the basses’ long, final descent to  $B^b$ —appropriately marked *perendosi*. When challenged on the practicality of finding singers to execute this line, he replied: “I knew the voices of my countrymen and I well knew what demands I could make upon Russian basses.”<sup>3</sup>

The composer’s shifting relationships among the voices, his tight control and integration of motivic material, and his lateral harmonic reinforcements of a central pitch characterize what is for good reason one of the best-known choral works of the twentieth century. Through his understanding of Orthodox liturgy and his adoption of chant formulas, Rachmaninov has crafted the piece of musical genius that is “Ныне отпушаеши” from *Всенощное Бдение*.

**Nota Bene:** The author would like to thank Kristina Boerger, a member of the editorial staff, not only for the help she provided with this article but also and more importantly, her dedication to the choral art. Thank you, Kristina.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 312.

<sup>2</sup> Bertensson and Leyda, 191.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*,



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