

Cleveland Chamber Choir: Music to mark the hours and seasons

by Mike Telin



This week Cleveland Chamber Choir invites you to join them by candlelight for a concert of two works that take listeners on a musical journey from sunset to sunrise, and winter to spring

On Friday October 24 at 7:30 pm at Trinity Cathedral, Gregory Ristow will lead the Cleveland Chamber Choir in Sergei Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil* and Reena Esmail's *A Winter Breviary*.

The program will be repeated on Saturday at 7:00 in Fairchild Chapel in Oberlin. Charles Edward McGuire, PhD, from Oberlin College & Conservatory, will present a pre-concert talk 45 minutes prior to each performance. Pay-what-you-wish tickets are available [online](#).

“In the traditional Eastern Orthodox All-Night Vigil service, prayers and chants would have been spaced through the entire night from just before sunset to just before the rising of the sun,” CCC artistic director Gregory Ristow said during a Zoom conversation. “But the service that Rachmaninoff would have had in mind combines all the prayers that would have been said through the night into one service.”

The *All-Night Vigil* is in 15 movements lasting just under an hour. “His relationship with sacred choral music is very interesting,” Ristow said. “We know that in his youth he did attend Orthodox services with his family, but less so in his adulthood. And he’d previously written the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* intending for it to

be used as service music. That work received one performance as part of a service but the Orthodox Church let it be known they didn't feel this was appropriate service music because it strayed too far from the chant that is the root of sacred music in that tradition."

Ristow noted that in spite of this, Rachmaninoff's setting of the *All-Night Vigil* text departs even farther from the expectations of the Orthodox Church.

"My take on this is that Rachmaninoff had to recognize that, at least in his lifetime, the piece wouldn't have been acceptable to the church as a piece of service music and that makes it all the more dear because he's writing out of passion, out of a need to set these words to music. We know it was one of his most beloved pieces. He even requested that the fifth movement, Nunc dimittis — Now Let Thy Servant Depart — be sung at his funeral."

All-Night Vigil is written for mixed chorus and the piece has some very low notes for the basses. "There are low D's, C's, and the famous low B-flat as well," Ristow said. "We've got two singers who are able to hit the low B-flat — a third of the section — which is great."

The conductor said that every time he returns to the score he finds more details, and more clues as to how Rachmaninoff imagined the piece to sound. "Every little crescendo, every little articulation is marked with such precision. And he thinks orchestrally, even when he's writing for voices."



Reena Esmail's three-movement *A Winter Breviary* is in the Hindustani tradition with scales or raags that are associated with worship at different times of the day.

"She's created the same journey through the night that Rachmaninoff gives us in the *All-Night Vigil* — going from sundown through to first light in the morning. At the same time it's also a journey from winter's

darkness to spring's light," Ristow said.

Reena Esmail grew up in California. Her parents are from India, but Ristow noted that she didn't grow up hearing Hindustani music. "Her mother's Catholic and her father is Muslim and she only came to Hindustani music because of a class she took when she was doing her masters at Yale and really fell in love with it. She has

since studied Carnatic singing as well and become a real expert at that. Her music lives in this beautiful place between Western and Hindustani classical traditions that reflects who she is.”

Ristow added that when Esmail and Rebecca Gay Howell, who wrote the poetry for *A Winter Breviary* were discussing the piece, they were interested in how both the Christian and Hindu traditions associate prayers with times of the day. “They wanted to bring those two traditions together — western harmony and eastern scales and modes — in this shared worship by the hours. I need to ask Reena if she intended this to be a partner to the Rachmaninoff because they work so beautifully together.”

As with all Cleveland Chamber Choir concerts, a portion of the donations will go to a local non-profit organization. “We’re partnering with [Re:Source Cleveland](#), whom we’ve worked with before. Their mission is to help immigrants in the Cleveland area become settled, self-sufficient, and self-supporting members of the community. Rachmaninoff himself as well as Reena Esmail’s parents were immigrants to the United States, and I think both have made us so much the richer for what they have brought to our musical world. So it feels like a really natural moment to partner with them again.”

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