

Rachmaninoff at the Madeleine is surprisingly intimate, despite 300 choristers

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MADELEINE FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES, University of Utah Choirs and Salt Lake Choral Artists, Cathedral of the Madeleine, April 11

It was standing room only at the Madeleine Festival's opening night concert Sunday. On the program was a single work: Sergei Rachmaninoff's monumental a cappella "All-Night Vigil," op. 37. Performing it were the University of Utah Singers and A Cappella Choir and the Salt Lake Choral Artists Chamber Choir and Concert Choir, all under the direction of conductor Brady Allred. Joining them were mezzo-soprano Stina Eberhardt, tenor Todd Miller and octavists (deep basses) Cameron Beauchamp and Glenn Miller.

With close to 300 voices taking part in the performance, the altar area of the cathedral was a tight fit for the singers, but using so many choristers was a good move on Allred's part. He used his huge vocal forces in different combinations, bringing a variety of colors to the different movements. He wisely reserved the combined ensemble for specific movements and for several climactic moments. And the result was a wonderfully captivating account of this rarely performed work.

Rachmaninoff's hourlong work is a stunningly spiritual piece infused with heartfelt sincerity and reverence. Best known for his works for piano, the "All-Night Vigil" puts him in a new perspective. The work is intense and dramatic, luminous and radiantly moving. Allred captured this in his interpretation. He brought an intimacy to the work, despite the large number of performers, that made it moving and inspiring. He brought out the nuances in the score and elicited a very musical and expressive performance from his singers.

The soloists were as on the mark as the choruses. Eberhardt and Miller sang forcefully but never strained to be heard over the choral ensemble. They brought fine coloration and articulation to their parts. The two octavists brought depth to the basses and added to the amazing sonority that Allred managed to create.

Underscoring the vocal imagery were photos of Russian icons, churches and landscapes projected on two large screens on either side of the choir. The screens also projected English subtitles of the text.

This is Allred's third appearance at the Madeleine Festival, and every time, he has brought something memorable and compelling to the festival. Hopefully, he and his choruses will return in the future.

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