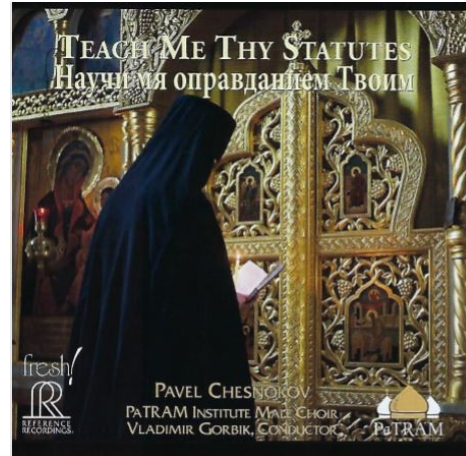


Recording of the Month

Pavel CHESNOKOV (1877-1944)
Teach Me Thy Statutes



Blagoslovi, dushe moia, Gospodi (Bless the Lord, O My Soul), *All-Night Vigil*, Op. 9 No. 18 [3:07]

Blazhen muzh (Blessed is the Man), *All-Night Vigil*, Op. 44, No. 2 [5:02]

Svete tikhij (Gladsome Light) [2:46]

Nine otpushchayeshi (Lord, Now Lettest Thou Thy Servant Depart) [3:26]

Hvalite imia Ghospodne (Praise the Name of the Lord) [3:01]

Blagosloven yesi, Ghospodi (Blessed Art Thou, O Lord) [7:50]

Voskreseniye Hristovo videvshe (Having Beheld the Resurrection of Christ) [2:56]

Voskres Iisus ot groba (Jesus Has Risen from the Tomb), Op. 44 No. 8 [00:57]

Velikoye slavosloviye (The Great Doxology), Op. 44 No. 9 [9:09]

Blagoslovi, dushe moia, Gospodi (Bless the Lord, O My Soul), Op. 40 No. 1 [3:17]

Slava ... Yedinorodniy Sine (Glory ... Only Begotten Son), Op. 9 No. 2 [2:31]

Heruvimskaya pesn' (The Cherubic Hymn), Op. 37 No. 1 [8:21]

Milost mira i Tebe poyem (A Mercy of Peace and We Hymn Thee), Op. 9 No. 10 [7:13]

Dostoyno yest' (It is Truly Fitting) [3:23]

Spaseniye sodelal yesi posrede zemli (Salvation is Created), Op. 25 No. 5 [4:07]

PaTRAM Institute Male Choir/Vladimir Gorbik

Soloists: Mikhail Davydov (Blessed is the Man), Vladimir Krasov (The Great Doxology)

rec. July 2016, Church of the Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian, Saratov Orthodox Theological Seminary, Russia
Texts in Russian (Cyrillic & transliterated) and English included

REFERENCE RECORDINGS FR-727 SACD [67:14]

It's a very common tactic when writing a review so to structure the argument that a verdict on the disc emerges quite naturally – or such is the hope! – in the closing paragraphs. No need for such a device here: this disc is, quite simply a stunner! In making that statement I'm thinking equally of the music, the performances and the superb recorded sound.

I'm sure I've heard some individual pieces of music by Pavel Chesnokov before but never a whole disc devoted to him. Consequently, I was glad to read some biographical information about him in the highly informative booklet. He was born in a village in Moscow Province; music ran in the family because his father was the village choirmaster. He studied at the Moscow Synodal School of Church Singing, graduating with a gold medal in 1895. Thereafter he was taken onto the teaching staff at the Synodal School and also conducted various church choirs in Moscow. After the 1917 Revolution it became increasingly difficult to function as a church musician; after 1928 a formal ban on such activity obliged Chesnokov to focus entirely on secular music-making whereas previously he had flourished in both genres. He came to a sad end in 1944, dying of a heart attack while queueing for bread in Moscow, his health already undermined by malnutrition. He left behind a portfolio of nearly 500 choral works, largely liturgical in nature.

On this disc a small fraction of his total output is performed by the PaTRAM Institute Male Choir. This is a composite Russian-American ensemble made up of members of one American and two Russian choirs that specialise in this repertoire. The choir comprises 21 tenors, 9 baritones, 7 basses and, crucially, five Russian bass profundo singers. These deep basses give a fantastic foundation to the choral sound, as we shall see.

Conductor Vladimir Gorbik provides detailed notes on the music in which he explains that the selected pieces are some of Chesnokov's best-known compositions and that in planning the disc it was decided not to record any of the composer's complete works. So, I suppose that what we have here might be described as a "taster"

I confess that I was pretty much hooked the first time that I

played the opening track, 'Bless the Lord, O My Soul'. I was attracted not just by the beauty of the music but, just as much, by the quality of the singing. At once we hear a seamless legato from the choir and their sound, simply as choral sound *per se*, gives immense pleasure and satisfaction. The blend is perfectly judged – and never falters – while the singers have an enviable dynamic range. Just to put the icing on the cake, the choir has been recorded in a lovely, resonant acoustic which is ideally suited to the music. Moreover, the engineers have judged the acoustic expertly so that the resonance enriches the sound and acts as a kind of halo round it while never blurring the sound or making it in any way diffuse or unclear. In other words, as a choral recording it's pretty much ideal.

And there, in truth, I could almost leave matters because all the qualities I've just outlined are constants throughout the 67 minutes or so of this disc's duration. However, I must give readers more of an idea of what's in store.

In 'Blessed is the Man' we hear one of the two soloists featured in this programme. Baritone Mikhail Davydov is a fervent soloist but he never allows his commitment to the music to lead him into over-singing. In this wonderfully prayerful setting the choir cradles the soloist's lines with gentle singing of "Alleluia". Discipline is a cardinal virtue of this choir and 'Gladsome Light' affords a choice example: the ensemble work is perfect throughout. Furthermore, another quality is evident on which I've not commented before. The members of the choir sing this music with evident belief, not just in the music but also in the words they are singing. I suppose that shouldn't be a surprise given the background of the choirs which have combined to make this recording but nonetheless the conviction of their performance is strongly evident in everything they do: these are far more than "merely" accomplished performances.

I loved the performance of 'Lord, Now Lettest Thou Thy Servant Depart', the text known in Western Christendom as the 'Nunc dimittis'. Among features that particularly caught my ear were the delicacy of the top tenors, singing in head voice, at the start and, later on, the way the basses provide a tonal foundation to the ensemble that is utterly secure but never overbearing. This is

a performance of genuine finesses.

'Having Beheld the Resurrection of Christ' starts off as a fervent celebration of the Resurrection but later the text demands music that is more awe-struck and subdued. The fine dynamic range of the choir is a decided asset in putting the music across successfully at all dynamic levels. The Great Doxology is the longest and arguably the musically richest of all the pieces. The singing is superb in this piece; the choir is very disciplined but this discipline in no way stifles fervour or eloquence. The blend and the tone quality never falter. By any standards this is supremely accomplished ensemble singing. In this piece we hear the second soloist, bass Vladimir Krasov who is splendidly sonorous in the litany-like episode near the end.

'The Cherubic Hymn' is simply outstanding, both as music and performance. This slow-moving piece opens in a vein of subdued devotion, the singing hushed and expertly controlled. Later, both the dynamics and the music's intensity increase. The choir of the PaTRAM Institute make this into a genuinely moving experience, culminating with ecstatic cries of "Alleluia".

If you want an example of the deep basses underpinning the whole choir then look no further than 'A Mercy of Peace' and 'We Hymn Thee' and specifically at the passage from 3;41, where the choir softly sings the word "Amin" several times. (This is immediately before the 'We Hymn Thee' section begins. Each time, the chords are expertly balanced and at the root of each chord there is a softly sonorous bass note. This is quintessential Russian singing.

I could have picked out examples from every single piece to demonstrate the prowess of this fabulous choir but I hope I've given you a flavour and encouraged you to investigate this disc if you are drawn to choral music in general and to Russian Orthodox liturgical music in particular. Standards of choral singing in general are higher today than they've ever been but even so it's not all that often that one experiences choral singing of this calibre.

And if I've concentrated on the calibre of the performances I

mean no disrespect to Pavel Chesnokov himself. All the music on this disc is very beautiful and extremely skilfully constructed. Furthermore, the texts that Chesnokov has set are in themselves striking and packed with rich imagery. His response to the words and to the beliefs they express is superb, born of deep conviction. Like all the best composers of vocal music, at one and the same time he serves and enhances the words he chooses to set.

As for the recorded sound, it is absolutely superb. The recordings were made by members of the American Soundmirror team. I've had occasion to praise their recordings before but this is perhaps the best example of their work that has come my way. Engineer John Newton and producer Blanton Alspaugh have given the performers an ideal recording which presents the performances ideally without ever calling attention to itself. The recording is as natural as it is technically accomplished.

It only remains to be said that the documentation is comprehensive in every respect and the essays provide the general listener with an ideal introduction to Pavel Chesnokov and his music.

I hope Reference Recordings will soon give us further opportunities to hear this magnificent choir. For now, though, as I said at the start, this present disc is a stunner.

John Quinn

Previous review: [Dan Morgan](#) (Recording of the Month)