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Blessed Art Thou Among Women - Orthodox Hymns to the Most-Holy Mother of God

PaTRAM Institute Singers / Peter Jermihov

rec. 2018, St. Alexander Nevsky Diocesan Cathedral, Howell, USA. HDCD

Russian texts & transliterations and English translations included

REFERENCE RECORDINGS FR-737 [79:11]

This is, I believe, the third disc that Reference Recordings has released featuring the choir of the PaTRAM Institute. Not long ago, I [reviewed](#) their excellent recording of the *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* by Kurt Sander. On that disc, the singers were conducted, as here, by Peter Jermihov. Prior to that, I and some of my colleagues had given a warm reception to [Teach Me Thy Statutes](#), the wholly exceptional disc of music for male voice choir by Pavel Grigorievich Chesnokov, which was deservedly named as MusicWeb International's Recording of the Year for 2018. So, this choir has serious form when it comes to the music of the Orthodox Church. So, too, does Peter Jermihov who was the conductor of one of the finest recordings I've yet heard of Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil* ([review](#)). With performers of such pedigree involved, I was keen to hear this latest disc on which they offer a programme of Orthodox hymns in honour of Mary, the Mother of God. On this occasion we hear an SATB choir of 30 (6/8/7/9).

Before discussing any of the music, mention should be made of the venue for this recording: St. Alexander Nevsky Diocesan Cathedral, Howell, New Jersey, a picture of which graces the front cover of this CD. It's one of the principal churches of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America, consecrated in 1999. As the opening track on the disc we hear the cathedral's bells which make a most impressive sound. The bells peal surprisingly quickly, constituting an increasingly urgent summons to prayer. To judge by what we hear on this disc, the cathedral possesses fine, resonant acoustics; the choir sounds very impressive with the warm aura of the building around their sound. The other reason to mention the cathedral is because the driving force behind its construction was Protopresbyter Valery Lukianov (1927-2018) to whose memory the disc is dedicated. He was uniquely qualified in this respect because apart from being a very senior cleric in the Orthodox Church he was a fully qualified civil engineer. One of his sons, Alexis, is the co-founder of PaTRAM Institute and one of the singers on this disc.

Let me pick out some of the pieces and performances which seem to me to be the highlights of this recital. Earlier, I mentioned the sacred music of Rachmaninoff. Many readers will know his *All-Night Vigil*, Op 37 and his *Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* Op 31 may also be familiar. However, his *The Theotokos, Who Is Ever-vigilant in Prayer* (1893) may be less well-known. It's an early work and takes the form of a Sacred Concerto for four-part choir. I don't think I've heard it before but the piece is impressive, as is the present performance.

I was very taken by Sviridov's *A Hymn of Praise to the Mother of God*. In his notes about the music Peter Jermihov cites this as an example of a technique of this particular composer: '“the dynamic in the static” – slow-moving chord structures that allow the listener to experience vast acoustical spaces.' I think it's a lovely piece and in this performance the rich, resonant bass line is especially noteworthy.

Mention of basses leads me to two more pieces that caught my ear. Pavel Chesnokov's *O Most Holy Theotokos, Save Us* evokes the dialogue between the Deacon and congregation in the Service of Supplication. Here, the Deacon's part is sung by Protodeacon Leonid Roschko. He's described as a baritone but with his large resonant voice he could easily pass for a bass. The choral passages are fervently sung. That's followed by Sergey Zheludkov's *Do Not Lament Me, O Mother* and here we experience the extraordinary sound of bass soloist Glenn Miller. He is an Octavist and he produces an arrestingly cavernous sound. So deep is Miller's voice that I could well imagine that were he an operatic bass he might well decline to sing the role of Fafner on the grounds that the music is too high-lying! It's a truly imposing sound and the choir matches his fervour. This is rich music, slow and prayerful, and it leaves a strong impression.

I was interested to hear *All of Creation Rejoices in Thee* by Nikolai Danilin because the composer was also the long-serving conductor of the Moscow Synodal Choir, in which capacity he conducted the first performance of Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil*. This piece by Danilin is clearly the work of someone with a deep understanding of choral style. It's a beautiful and sincere piece.

Anyone familiar with Sir John Tavener's *Hymn for the Dormition of the Mother of God* will recognise pre-echoes in Grigory Lvovsky's *O ye Apostles, Assembled Here*; both pieces set the same text, are founded on the same chant, and Tavener's harmonies bear similarity with Lvovsky's. A much more elaborate piece is *Magnification for the Icon 'Joy of all the sorrowful'* by Nikolai Mateyev. Though some of the pieces on this programme employ a solo voice, Mateyev's piece is unique in using an SATB solo quartet as well as the choir. For this recording, the PaTRAM choir's parts were reconstructed from a handwritten score, from which I infer that the piece is unpublished. Peter Jermihov refers to it as "an amazing revival of the choral opulence from a bygone era". The score offers the richest textures of all on this programme. The spacious and sonorous music is arresting in its devotional beauty. Richly textured, too, is Nikolai Tolstiaikov's *With the Voice of the Archangel*, which is a radiant piece.

The programme ends with two pieces included as a direct tribute to Fr. Valery Lukianov. The anonymous *In the Flesh Thou Didst Fall Asleep* is an Easter text which Lukianov himself used to sing in services. Pavel Chesnokov's *Memory Eternal* is intoned by Valery Lukianov's son, Alexis in wonderfully sepulchral bass tones after which the full choir takes up the music. The piece is slow, reverent and radiant. Chesnokov's music is suffused with profound beauty and it provides a moving conclusion to this programme.

This is an excellent recital. I've mentioned only a few of the pieces but I would ask readers to take on trust that the items which haven't received a specific mention are equally fine and eloquent. Also, please take on trust that the unmentioned works are performed to the same very high standard as the works that I've specifically referenced. The singing throughout this disc is of an extremely high quality. Not only does the choir sound superb, but they also evidence great commitment to the music. This is singing from the heart.

I note that the producer of the disc is Blanton Alspaugh which suggests to me that the recording may be the work of Soundmirror. The recorded sound is richly satisfying, conveying an ideal

ambience while at the same time reporting all the choral parts with clarity. There's a very comprehensive and informative booklet in Russian and English, though I have to say that I found the layout somewhat confusing in places. That's the only slight flaw in this presentation, though. Devotees of Orthodox church music can invest with confidence.

[John Quinn](#)

Previous review: [Marc Rochester](#)

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