

## *Halley's Comment*

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**Paul Halley's letter to the audience in the program notes for the King's at the Cathedral Series: "For All The Saints" concert featuring Rachmaninov's "All-Night Vigil" (Vespers).**

**The Chapel Choir of the University of King's College with Ensemble Regale**

Cathedral of All Saints, Halifax, Nova Scotia - November 6, 2011 - 7:30 p.m.

Dear Friends,

Thank you for joining us for this, our third annual concert entitled "For All The Saints". I write this on the night of All Souls. The Chapel Choir has just sung the Fauré Requiem at our Solemn Eucharist during which we were particularly mindful of the faithful departed from the King's community at whose requiems we sang this year – Robert Crouse, Peggy Heller, and Jane Curran.

As you may know, the choir performing for you this evening is privileged in many ways, but first among them is the opportunity they have every week of term to sing God's praises at the services in the Chapel at King's. Last Thursday they sang at the Solemn Eucharist in commemoration of Saints Simon and Jude, patron saints of desperate cases and lost causes. Needless to say these are saints dear to the heart of the King's community. At this service we were blessed with a sermon from our Chaplain, Fr Gary Thorne. I can think of no better way of bringing you into the heart of Rachmaninov's masterpiece which you will hear this evening, than to quote directly from that sermon.

"In just over a week the choir will sing Rachmaninov's "All-Night Vigil". It has been said that no composition represents the end of an era so clearly as this liturgical piece. With the Revolution, music of the Orthodox Church was to survive only as a 'cultural' phenomenon, if at all.

I hope that as the choristers prepare to sing the "All-Night Vigil" they will remember that generally this piece signals the last time for almost 75 years that these liturgical texts would be sung to God's glory freely and fully in Russia and later the Soviet Union. Just two years after the composition's premiere in 1915 the Revolution would begin to call such liturgical texts "antiquated" and "obsolete" – "the opiate of the masses". The officials would increasingly claim that religion prevented human progress and enlightenment. 'Fanatics' who persisted in believing in God were at the risk of being labelled mentally ill, consigned to the inhumane conditions of mental hospitals or sent to labour camps.

During the Stalin years alone (1924-1953) 600 bishops, 40,000 priests and 120,000 monks and nuns were killed. Many died in the harsh conditions of prisons or labour camps; others were shot or buried alive. Literally millions of ordinary Orthodox believers died in prison camps, or suffered indescribably during interrogations. The finding of an icon was often sufficient proof.

In dying they sang the praises of their God – and He did not abandon them. In dying they dared to sing the very same words that the choir will sing at the Cathedral. Indeed, because they dared to sing these words they were tortured and killed. I wonder if the choir might think of singing the "All-Night Vigil" in such a bold and beautiful and intentional way as to honour those for whom to sing these words meant martyrdom in the 20th century."

As usual our Chaplain and pastor has challenged us to go deeper into the music than might be comfortable or convenient. I'm afraid this challenge probably extends to you, our audience and supporters. In fact it is a call for each of us, in the words of poet William Stafford, to "be awake – for the darkness around us is deep". This darkness takes many forms – some clearly sinister, such as the Stalinist variety, some more subtle. But there is no doubt about which way to turn when the darkness descends. According to the Great Doxology – "in Thy light we shall see light."

The saints have turned away from darkness even in the midst of trial and persecution. They have chosen to be awake, to keep watch, even at the cost of their lives. It is their open eyes that reflect the light of the world, the light to lighten all people. With them we sing in one blest communion, one fellowship divine.

Paul Halley