

## Latvian Radio Choir review: A revelation and musical highlight of the Sydney Festival

Peter McCallum

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### Sydney Festival: Latvian Radio Choir

#### City Recital Hall, January 23

This concert was a revelation in terms of what can be done with 24 fine singers, refined sensitivity to vocal sound, an ethos of quality and the sanctity of the musical experience, all combined, no doubt, with sheer hard work from the choir and conductor Sigvards Klava.

*Immortal Bach*, credited as a joint effort between Bach himself and Knut Nystedt who died last year aged 99, began with Bach's harmonies in the chorale, *Komm susser Tod*, subsequently filled out with dense clusters, before thinning back. The effect was like mist engulfing a beautiful object and then evaporating. In Arvo Part's *Nunc Dimittis*, immaculate vowel formation created a hushed purity of sound against moments of glowing strength without a hint of stridency.

As this and Part's *Da pacem Domine* highlighted, the choir's control and balance is a wonder to behold. The basses have a tangible wooded grain that speaks with clarity and firmness at any pitch or volume – sometimes so low one could almost count the vibrations per second – while the sopranos gleam brightly and truly whether in blazing splendour or the quietest ethereal light. The altos create smooth bony softness yet firmness in the lower mid range while the tenors have immaculately pitched radiance whatever the dynamic.

In *Hear my Prayer, O Lord* by Purcell and Sven-David Sandstrom, another modern paraphrase on a Baroque work, Purcell's sensuous lines expanded under the force of their own expressiveness, opening out into a thrillingly engrossing sound with penetrating (but never shrill) high soprano singing. The most remarkable piece was *Muo:aa:yly:oum* (try saying that ten times quickly) by Swedish composer Anders Hillborg, a study in spectral vocal textures, whistling and breathy sounds, rapidly reiterated syllables, and mutating vowels, all combining with the natural harmonics of densely voiced chords to create a cosmic cloud infused with light.

The first of two Mahler transcriptions, Clytus Gottwald's arrangement of *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (I am lost to the world) from the Ruckert-Lieder, blended the orchestral and vocal lines of the original into a web of tender warmth, welling upwards in a soaring high soprano solo. The second Mahler arrangement, Gerard Pesson's *Kein deutscher Himmel*, set words to the Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony, which sounds like sacrilege until you hear it sung with such surpassing beauty.

Latvian composer Peteris Vasks' striking work, *Ziles zina*, created a robust amalgam of vocal articulations, veiled chords, chattering, laughing, wispy upward inflections and lusty clamour to create a pungently forceful work. As encore, they sang the Latvian song *Dziedot dzimu, dziedot augu* as though greeting the dawn of freedom.

If you are reading this before their final concert on Saturday 24 January, do try and get a ticket.

*This concert is repeated January 24*

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/latvian-radio-choir-review-a-revelation-and-musical-highlight-of-the-sydney-festival-20150124-12xfnv.html>

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# Review: Latvian Radio Choir, a full-throated vocal celebration

February 1, 2015 10.32pm EST

Author



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The stunning vocal performance of the Latvian Radio Choir was one of the highlights of the 2015 Sydney Festival. Sydney Festival

Swedish director Kay Pollak's film [As It is in Heaven](#) (2004) climaxes at a point of musical bliss which is both chaotic and profoundly unifying. Rather than singing a few polished songs with energy in effort to win an international choir competition, the Swedish chorus simply makes any old sound: that is, an "aah". And they don't stop.

Soon enough, the audience join in. Everyone stands. Boundaries between choir and spectator are dissolved. Young and old together. The pitch-perfect with the wildly flat, all one in the oceanic mesh of sound. Aah! Ecstatic dissonance: moans and tones of all volumes.

Tears are shed. Such is the power of music – the art to which, Schopenhauer once famously said – all art aspires. There is something particular about the human voice as instrument; its impact haunts like the wind.

I couldn't help but be reminded of this moment in Pollak's film while attending the first ever Australian performance of the Grammy award-winning [Latvian Radio Choir](#) at Angel Place for this year's Sydney Festival. Those who weren't lucky enough to attend the live performance can hear the recital broadcast on Classic FM [here](#).

Let me get straight to the high points: there were two – the rumbling and windswept sound sphere of a song by Swedish composer [Anders Hillborg](#), entitled, Muoayiyoum; and the encore, an old Latvian folk tune, The Nightingale, sung in full-throated ease.

The latter was a much-needed release of melody after a powerfully unusual concert, one that was intensely sober, and at times somewhat mournful. It was as if one had been bent into various contortions over a series of complex pieces, and was suddenly let out to play.

But I digress.

Muoayiyoum– is a sound experiment in eco-harmonics. It is a meditation on the reverberations made possible by the human mouth: the lips, tongue, palette and throat, the pharynx, larynx and oesophagus, diaphragm and gut.

Yet it is more than this: it is minimalism, an egoless, wordless, arresting and rhythmic hum-scape. It is organic, finding its own shape and meaning the moment each syllable and vowel is sung. It swells in sound and builds in intensity and heals like a single kiss. Listen to it. Like Thomas Tallis' Spem in Allium, a motet of 40 voices in 40 parts, this song is only possible with an entire choir.

It is truly a miracle. A startling event that is a privilege to witness and hear. One might ask: How does Sigvards Klāva, choir director, and his Latvian choir pull it off?



The Latvian Radio Choir in performance. [Sydney Festival](#)

Well, it seems, with a great deal of work. The Latvian Radio Choir rehearse full-time and are consummate professionals who have been performing non-stop since their inauguration in 1940.

There was clearly an urgency to assert an artistic identity as Latvia lost its independence to the Soviet Union and then to Nazi Germany in the same year.

As one of Europe's leading choirs, they have carved out one of the most distinctive musical identities around. These days, their idea is to push the limits of the human voice. They're as cutting-edge as it gets in choral-terms and they tour the world.

The programming was deft and deliberate – like a superbly-planned meal where appetites are whetted with the most specific of flavours that are paired with matching wines – the tones and keys tuned the ear for what was to come, delectations of every sort, mostly unexpected. It is true that the tension in the packed hall was high; the audience was spellbound and the sense of drama, palpable.

Four of the pieces were musical deconstructions. Conventional choral pieces were suddenly taken over by the experimental interventions of a European composer. Sacred songs were met with clashing notes, changing pulsations and agitating dynamics.

Johann Sebastian Bach's was music transformed into an innovative riff by Norwegian composer [Knut Nystedt](#). Henry Purcell's Hear my Prayer Lord was soon infected with notes of strange despair by Swedish composer, [Sven-David Sandström](#).

Gustav Mahler was not immune to the musical deconstructions either. German composer Clytus Gottwald unpicked the tonality of I am Lost in this World and unravelled it. French composer [Gérard Pesson](#) distorted one of Mahler's hymns into an ode to skepticism and existential anguish.

The line-up ended with [Pēteris Vasks](#)' Zīles ziņa, one of the more impressive pieces of the evening. Surprisingly, Vasks was the only Latvian composer to feature in the program. With many members of Sydney's Latvian community in attendance, one hopes they were not disappointed at the rather un-Latvian repertoire.

But Vasks' piece made up for this: it was exciting, varied, and aleatory; sounds bordering speech were interspersed with melodic resonances akin to that of [Zbigniew Preisner](#), Poland's much-loved contemporary composer.

Each song was sung with astonishing technical brilliance. The only time I can recall being so captivated and surprised by a concert such as this was Steve Reich's 2012 visit to Sydney Opera House, when six hours vanished in an instant.

Estonian composer, Arvo Pärt – a favourite of mine – featured twice in the program as a tribute to his 80th birthday this year. In an interview with Hermann Conen, Pärt [said](#):

*I could compare my music to white light which contains all colours. Only a prism can divide the colours and make them appear; this prism is the spirit of the listener.*

You could almost hear the audience listening, such was their devoted attention – they were co-participants, immersed in all the colour.

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# The Classical Reviewer. Arvo Pärt. DA PACEM DOMINE

14.10.2016

"The Latvian Radio Choir under their director, Sigvards Klava is absolutely first class, bringing performance of tremendous beauty, accuracy and understanding. The recording made in St. John's Church (Sv. Jāņa baznīca), Riga, Latvia, is superb. There are informative booklet notes together with full texts and English translations. Choir under their director, Sigvards Klava bring performances of works by Arvo Pärt of tremendous beauty, accuracy and understanding on a new release from Ondine. (..)"

The Latvian Radio Choir under their director, Sigvards Klava bring performances of works by Arvo Pärt of tremendous beauty, accuracy and understanding on a new release from Ondine. The Latvian Radio Choir is a full time professional choir that was founded in 1940. The choir is a seven-time recipient of the Great Music award of the Latvian government and have collaborated with such well-known names as Stephen Layton, Tõnu Kaljuste, Lars Ulrik Mortensen and Esa-Pekka Salonen. Under their Chief Conductor, Sigvards Klava <http://radiokoris.lv/choir/sigvards-klava> the choir has made a number of highly praised recordings for Ondine [www.ondine.net](http://www.ondine.net) the latest of which features music by Arvo Pärt (b.1935) [www.universaledition.com/Arvo-Paert/composers-and-works/composer/534](http://www.universaledition.com/Arvo-Paert/composers-and-works/composer/534) entitled Da Pacem Domine. Triodion (1998) was commissioned by Lancing College, Sussex, England to celebrate their 150th anniversary and must have sounded as wonderful in the large acoustic of their chapel as it does here. In five parts it opens with an ethereal, pure toned Introduction opening for high female voices before quickly moving into Ode I where male voices sing over droned background, bringing exquisite sonorities. There are some quite wonderful harmonies with the music rising in strength midway on the words 'For which cause we cry aloud unto thee with thanksgiving.' They fall back to a hush as 'O Jesus the Son of God, have mercy upon us.' is slowly chanted before we glide into a luminous Ode II. There are lovely textures with the music increasing in power, beautifully phrased and paced within this acoustic, Sigvards Klava allowing reverberation of the voices to die before falling to a chant of 'O Most Holy Birth giver of God, save us.' Ode III opens with the female voices rising up, immediately joined by male voices before falling to a slow, quiet undulating passage. The music rises and falls a number of times with the female voices finding a great purity before gently arriving at a rising and falling repeated motif to end peacefully. A solo soprano opens Coda before the choir joins to add a quiet, sonorous final 'Amen.' Sieben Magnificat-Antiphonen (1988/91) is set in German reflecting his residence in Germany at the time. It was composed for the RIAS Chamber Choir, Berlin and comprises seven antiphons to be sung on each of the seven evenings before Christmas Eve. Pärt finds the most lovely luminous textures in I O Weisheit (O Wisdom) with the choir delivering the most perfect realisation of this lovely piece, a simple recurring theme with subtly developed harmonies. The male voices lay down a wordless layer or drone in II O Adonai over which rich deep voices slowly take the text, again developing some lovely harmonies. With III O Sproß aus Isais Wurzel (O Scion of Isaiah's Line) female voices rise across the choir in some of Pärt's finest dissonances creating some quite lovely effects before rising dramatically into IV O Schlüssel Davids (O David's Key), full of great strength, filling the acoustic, again beautifully phrased and paced. A wonderful section. The choir move gently and quietly into the lovely V O Morgenstern (O Morning Star) blending some lovely harmonies to arrive at a quiet, glowing coda. The choir finds a faster moving rhythmic VI O König aller Völker (King of All Nations) where voices are layered and built as the music slowly increases in dynamics to a sudden halt. A soft, quiet and gentle VII O Immanuel slowly expands through some lovely textures, growing in strength, arriving at some dramatic statements before finding a quiet end. Nunc dimittis (2001) was written for and first performed by the Choir of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, Edinburgh, Scotland as part of the Edinburgh Festival. A male voiced drone slowly expands throughout the choir through some exquisite bars with the words of the Nunc dimittis slowly appearing. This exquisite setting brings some lovely blending of textures out of which a soprano voice emerges, rising through some stunning passages before falling back to find a quieter conclusion. Dopo la vittoria (After the victory) (1996/98) finds a lighter, more buoyant feel as it dances rhythmically forward before finding some extended slower, more sonorous passages. The choir shape this music beautifully as it moves through vibrant passages with the choir sounding out wonderfully. There are glorious, luminous passages where female voices sound

above the choir before the opening vibrancy returns at the end. *Virgencita* (2012) was inspired by the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe and was premiered by the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir in León, Mexico. Female voices open slowly and gently with the male voices taking over before the whole choir rises in this lovely setting. The piece progresses through some lovely harmonies and textures with this choir showing such sensitivity in the gentle phrases and sonorities before moving through some glowing powerful passages to a hushed end. *The Woman with the Alabaster Box* (1997) and *Tribute to Caesar* (1997) were written as companion pieces for the 350th anniversary of the Karlstad Diocese in Sweden, both works taking a text from the Gospel of St. Matthew. Female voices gently open *The Woman with the Alabaster Box*, soon joined by the rest of the choir, before finding a greater strength. There is a high point when the male voices sing over a wordless female drone before leading to a rich, hushed conclusion. Male voices slowly and gently take *Tribute to Caesar* forward, the whole choir joining to find some haunting moments before rising in power only to fall back. Pärt's use of the various sections of the choir is inspired. The disc's title work, *Da pacem Domine* (2004/06) was commissioned by conductor Jordi Savall for a peace concert in Barcelona, Spain. The choir brings some lovely harmonies and phrasing, revealing some quite wonderful, distinctive ideas from Pärt as the music proceeds in little pulses of vocal power, building in strength before the lovely coda. The Latvian Radio Choir under their director, Sigvards Klava is absolutely first class, bringing performance of tremendous beauty, accuracy and understanding. The recording made in St. John's Church (Sv. Jāņa baznīca), Riga, Latvia, is superb. There are informative booklet notes together with full texts and English translations.

**Bruce Reader, [The Classical Reviewer](#)**

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## Magical and mystical: the Latvian Radio Choir impresses in Dublin

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*By Andrew Larkin, 05 May 2015*

Spiritual transcendence, ghostly wailing, harmonic deconstruction, microtonal singing – not your average concert experience, admittedly, but there again the Latvian Radio Choir (LRC) is far from being your average choral group. In what was one of the most explorative and daring concerts of the season, the LRC, under the baton of the ever-sensitive Sigvards Klava, treated us to a fascinating range of styles and vocal effects. Comprising of 24 singers, one of LRC's goals is to push the human voice to its limits and last night I have witnessed to sounds that I thought not possible of the human voice.



Latvian Radio Choir

© Latvian Radio Choir

No strangers to adventurous programming, the LRC chose extracts from Rachmaninov's sublime *All Night Vigil* (incorrectly named *Vespers*, the entire service for which would conclude at dawn with *Matins*) for the first half, while the second half showcased Nordic and Baltic contemporary music with surreal vocal effects. This was serious, experimental music with not even a sniff of a crowd-pleaser. While admirable and frankly fascinating for those who went, it might go some way in explaining why the hall was far from full. This was such a pity as this concert proved to be one of this year's highlights.

The LRC have won the highest praise for their recording of Rachmaninov's *All Night Vigil* and so anticipation was high. Nor did they disappoint. From the opening few bars I was much impressed by the finely sculpted dynamic range; a rich, warm *forte* contrasting with an ethereal *pianissimo*. This favourable impression only grew with each passing movement as LRC delivered the text of each canticle in crystal clear diction and pinpointing the intonation with scintillating accuracy. The second movement showed how delectably balanced the voices were; the altos hovered over the drone of the tenors which then subsided as the sopranos launched forth. The basses, warm and deep, were in the background but sounding enough to be fully conscious of them always. There was a magical quality to the "Slava Otsu" (Glory be to the Father) as the music ebbed and flowed before rising on the final *Alleluia*, like incense, before the Almighty.

A sense of reverence and spiritual depth informed LRC's interpretation. I got the feeling that this was less of a concert performance and more of an intimate insight into Orthodox liturgy where the sublimity of the music was a reflection of the divine and a pathway to it. There was a touching gentleness to the "Bogoroditse devo" (Rejoice O Virgin) of the sixth canticle while the *Alleluia* in the ninth sounded like the pealing of bells. With the magnificent close ushering in the Resurrection, we too felt as if we had been reborn after such an uplifting experience.

Lined up against the wall, the LRC opened the second half with Norwegian composer Knut Nystedt's *Immortal Bach*. Taking the opening line of Bach's chorale *Komm, süsßer Tod* Nystedt (who died last year at the age of 99) dissolves the original harmony by adding dissonance after dissonance, suspension after suspension, before it disintegrates mysteriously and magically resolves into the next concord.

Young contemporary Latvian composer's Eriks Ešenvalds' *Légende de la Femme Emmurée* tells the ancient Albanian folk story of how three brothers must sacrifice one of their wives in order to finish the castle they are building. This featured some plaintive and highly distinctive type of yodelling. The LRC conjured up a creepy atmosphere here with one of the soprano screeching at the top of her range and the rest of the choir singing in harsh intervals of seconds and sevenths.

For me it was Swedish composer Anders Hillborg's *Muo:aa:yiy:oum* that was the highlight of the concert. Here, the LRC conjured up a fascinating palette of sounds by use of overtones. The piece demands the choir to split into 16

parts and to vocalise *muo:aa:yiy:oum* for around twelve minutes, while at the same time singing fiendishly difficult quarter tones, whistling, hand tremolos and a host of other *recherché* techniques. The piece opened with a ghostly shimmering effect that did not seem of human origin before a cascade of other colours and sonorities soon took over. I heard a cacophony of what sounded like flutes, string tremolos and vibrato, even a creaky door hinges. It was one of the most extraordinary pieces I have ever heard.

Ligetti's *Lux Aeterna* sounded almost normal and familiar after such a work and the LCR captured the otherworldly effects very well here. Fellow Latvian composer, Pēteris Vasks' *Zīles Zīna* concluded the concert. This was a very effective piece with sibilant syllables being tossed backwards and forwards. It was not short of drama as laughter, speech, growling and ghostly crying all featured.

Showing that not all is magical and mystical, the LRC sang a popular folk song as an encore.

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# The New York Times

MUSIC

## Rachmaninoff's 'All-Night Vigil'

By JAMES R. OESTREICH MARCH 29, 2013

**Rachmaninoff:**

**'All-Night Vigil'**

Latvian Radio Choir, conducted by Sigvards Klava. Ondine ODE 1206-5; CD.

Easter is upon us in the West, but the Russian Easter falls especially late this year, on May 5. So there is time enough to revel in the latest recording of Rachmaninoff's wonderful Vespers, as the "All-Night Vigil" is also known. And there is much to savor in an excellent performance by the [Latvian Radio Choir](#), conducted by its artistic director, [Sigvards Klava](#).

Like Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff wrote two major sacred works: settings of the Vespers service and of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the basic service of the Russian Orthodox Church. As the more elegant and eloquent of the Rachmaninoff pair (a judgment based solely on aesthetic grounds, not religious efficacy), the Vespers is recorded with some frequency.





ON PHOTOGRAPHY Choral works by Bryars, Maskats and Silvestrov **Latvian Radio Choir** / Sigvards Klava, Kaspars Putrtins  
GB Records (6) Track 3

**Here is some truly astounding singing: indeed, it's tempting to echo the patron of GB Records, Gavin Bryars, when he suggests that they may be one of the finest choirs in the world.** In works by Bryars himself, Arturs Maskats (a finalist in the last Masterprize competition) and Constantin Silvestrov, they sing with **breathhtaking virtuosity, control — and sheer beauty of tone.**