



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SKYLARK PRESENTS RACHMANINOFF'S 'VESPERS' FROM NEW CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED EDITION

Four-time GRAMMY®-nominated ensemble returns to Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil* with groundbreaking edition prepared by two GRAMMY®-nominated artists, conductor Matthew Guard and vocal soloist Fotina Naumenko.

BOSTON, MA (March 2025) – Four-time GRAMMY®-nominated vocal ensemble Skylark returns this spring with a profound presentation of Sergei Rachmaninoff's masterpiece, the *All-Night Vigil* (commonly known as 'Vespers'), performing from their own original edition of the score. Prepared by two GRAMMY®-nominated artists—Artistic Director Matthew Guard and acclaimed soprano Fotina Naumenko—this edition based on Rachmaninoff's original autograph manuscript has quickly gained recognition and is now being adopted by leading choral organizations nationwide. The performances will carry deep personal meaning for Guard, coinciding with his first son's 10th birthday and the anticipated birth of his third son. Skylark's recordings have received six GRAMMY® nominations in the last six years, establishing the ensemble as one of the most decorated professional vocal ensembles in America.

Performances will take place in four locations:

- **Wednesday, April 30, 2025 at 7PM | Corpus Christi Parish, Sandwich MA**
- **Thursday, May 1, 2025 at 7PM | St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Newburyport MA**
- **Friday, May 2, 2025 at 7PM | St. Paul's Parish Harvard Square, Cambridge MA**
- **Sunday, May 4, 2025 at 3PM | Christ Church Greenwich, Greenwich CT**

A SINGULAR EDITION BORN FROM DEDICATION AND PANDEMIC ISOLATION

The new edition emerged from Matthew Guard's deep study of Rachmaninoff's handwritten manuscript, obtained from the Glinka Museum in Moscow. "I was awestruck by the autograph on two levels," Guard explains. "It was humbling to see every minute detail written in Rachmaninoff's own hand, and the visual layout of the score, especially portions with extended chant-like phrases without barlines, brought very clear musical ideas of phrasing to life."

After performing the work with renowned basso profundo Glenn Miller in 2019, Guard was encouraged to create a new edition based on the autograph. When the global pandemic paused Skylark's concert schedule for over a year, Guard partnered with soprano Fotina Naumenko on this ambitious project. Naumenko's

background in a Russian-American Orthodox family, professional training, and experience studying in St. Petersburg on a Fulbright fellowship created "the perfect mix of skills to help a highly competent choir of non-native speakers bring the work to life in an authentic way."

This groundbreaking edition, a product of COVID isolation that transformed challenge into creative opportunity, is now being performed by Westminster Choir College, the Bethlehem Bach Choir under Dr. Christopher Jackson, and the Conspirare Symphonic Choir with Craig Hella Johnson. The creation of this edition is particularly notable for bringing together two GRAMMY®-nominated artists - Guard was nominated with Skylark for their 2024 album *Clear Voices in the Dark*, while Naumenko received a separate nomination for her solo album *Bespoke Songs* in the Best Classical Solo Vocal Album category.

A DEEPLY PERSONAL CONNECTION

These performances hold profound personal significance for Artistic Director Matthew Guard. The Robert Shaw recording of Rachmaninoff's 'Vespers' played a pivotal role during the birth of his first son Harry in 2014, providing comfort during a dramatic emergency delivery. As Harry has just turned 10 and Guard and his wife are expecting their third son shortly after these performances, the timing adds an extra layer of meaning to the concerts. The full story, as written by Matthew Guard in November 2014, is included at the end of this press release.

TIMELY RESONANCE IN CURRENT EVENTS

The programming of this Russian masterpiece comes at a complex geopolitical moment, which Guard acknowledges thoughtfully. "I don't think we can shy away from the complex discussion of performing music of Russian heritage during a time of profound violence inflicted by Vladimir Putin's regime," he notes. However, he sees deeper resonance in Rachmaninoff's own story: the composer fled Russia following the Revolution, becoming an American immigrant who never returned to his homeland. He later co-authored an article in the New York Times with other Russian exiles condemning violence against the Russian people by Stalin's government.

"This is not music from an artist who stood by passively in the face of violence and oppression from the leaders of Russia, but one who spoke out with the beauty of his art and with the conviction of his beliefs," Guard explains. "I believe that sharing this profound work of art is our way of demonstrating the best of humanity at a time when the absolute worst is on display."

INTERNATIONAL SOLOIST LINEUP

The performances feature an impressive international lineup of soloists including Lebanese-Palestinian Canadian tenor **Haitham Haidar**, whose "bright" and "innately lyrical voice" has earned acclaim across North America, Europe, and Asia. London-based mezzo-soprano **Luthien Brackett**, who has appeared on six GRAMMY®-nominated albums and regularly performs with world-class ensembles like The Monteverdi Choir, also joins the roster. The ensemble is complemented by renowned basso profundo **Eric Alatorre**, best known for his nearly 30-year tenure with Chanticleer, bringing his famously deep, rich voice to the challenging low passages of Rachmaninoff's score.



ABOUT SKYLARK

GRAMMY®-nominated Skylark, one of the world's leading vocal ensembles, blends some of America's most virtuosic voices into an emotionally impactful and cohesive whole. Through innovative, imaginative, and interdisciplinary programming, Skylark aims to redefine the choral experience for artists and audiences alike.



Skylark's mission is to inspire with the beauty of the human voice, weaving elements of place, art, literature, history, and music into singular experiences that ignite wonder and discovery. Their unexpected themes, surprising connections, and imaginative collaborations draw new audiences to the transcendent power of vocal music. While deeply rooted in their home communities in Massachusetts and New York, their performances and recordings set new global standards for vocal artistry that resonate with audiences worldwide.

The ensemble has received six GRAMMY® nominations in the last six years for outstanding recordings and achieved multiple Billboard Traditional Classical Chart entries. Skylark's performances have been called "gripping" by The Times of London and "thrilling" by Gramophone Magazine. Limelight Magazine (Australia) has called Skylark a "serious contender" for a list of the "world's best choirs," underscoring the ensemble's growing international recognition.

ABOUT MATTHEW GUARD

Four-time GRAMMY®-nominee Matthew Guard has firmly established his reputation as one of the most innovative programmers in choral music today. Praised for his "catalyzing leadership" (Q2/WQXR) and "musically creative and intellectually rich" programming (Opera Obsession), Guard is passionate about communicating something unique in each concert and recording. He scours the world of available repertoire for each program, exhaustively researches each piece, and crafts concerts and printed programs that captivate audiences with their hidden connections and seamless artistry.



ABOUT FOTINA NAUMENKO

GRAMMY®-nominated soprano Fotina Naumenko has been praised for her "radiant voice" (Boston Globe), described as both "angelic" (MusicWeb International) and "capable of spectacular virtuosic hi-jinks" (Boston Musical Intelligencer). Fotina's singing encompasses a wide variety of vocal genres including oratorio, opera, art song, choral and contemporary music, both as a soloist and ensemble musician. She serves on the voice faculty of Shenandoah Conservatory in Winchester, VA, and is in demand as a Russian and Slavonic diction expert. In 2024, she received a GRAMMY® nomination for Best Classical Solo Vocal Album for her recording *Bespoke Songs*.



FEATURED SOLOISTS

Luthien Brackett, mezzo-soprano

London-based mezzo-soprano Luthien Brackett was named after a character in J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium. Praised by the press for her "lushness and delicacy," and "silky tone among all registers," she is in great demand as an alto soloist and professional chorister. Luthien can be heard in the role of Anima ("the soul") in Seraphic Fire's well-regarded recording of Hildegard von Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum*, released in 2021. She appears regularly with some of the world's preeminent professional vocal ensembles, including The Monteverdi Choir, with whom she performed Berlioz's *Les Troyens* to sell out audiences at the Berlioz Festival, the Salzburg Festival, the Berlin Festival, and the BBC Proms last year. Her recent solo appearances include her debut with The Bach Choir of Bethlehem as the alto soloist for their recording of Felix Mendelssohn's adaptation of J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, which was listed as one of the best classical albums of 2024 (so far!) by the London Times. Among her numerous commercial recordings are six GRAMMY®-nominated albums, including Julia Wolfe's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Anthracite Fields* with the Bang on a Can All-Stars (2015), *It's a Long Way* with Skylark (2022), and Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil* with The Clarion Society (2023). Luthien enjoys cooking, traveling, reading, binge-watching K-dramas, and practicing her French, German, and Korean on Duo Lingo. She lives in northwest London.



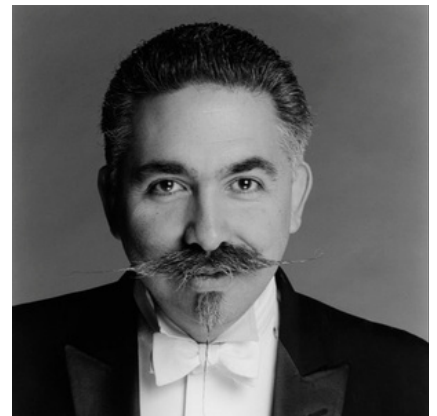
Haitham Haidar, tenor

Haitham Haidar is a Lebanese-Palestinian Canadian tenor based in Montreal. He is a proud graduate of Yale's Institute of Sacred Music, McGill's Schulich School of Music, and the University of British Columbia. Haitham is praised for his "musical and linguistic versatility" and his "bright" and "innately lyrical voice" and enjoys performing oratorio, opera, and chamber music across North America, Europe, and Asia. He has recently been seen as a tenor soloist with Early Music Vancouver, Belgian ensemble Zefiro Torna (at the Morgenland Festival in Osnabrück) and as the Evangelist in Bach's *St. John Passion* at the Winnipeg Baroque Festival. He has also been a recent soloist with TENET Vocal Artists, Orchestre Arion, as well as the Evangelist in Schütz's *Weinachtshistorie* with Folger Consort. Haitham is a featured soloist on Conspirare's GRAMMY®-nominated album *House of Belonging*. Haitham has also performed as a soloist and ensemble member with groups like Seraphic Fire and Skylark. Haitham's debut solo album *Zaytoun* will be available on streaming platforms summer 2025. Haitham's approach to performance has always been humanity first. Being an Arab immigrant in North America comes with its unique set of oppressive challenges and it is because of that and what he sees around him in the field, that he aims to touch people's hearts with music and compassion and make change in the world the best way he knows how.



Eric Alatorre, basso profundo

Eric Alatorre is the basso profundo best associated with Chanticleer, where he was a member for nearly 30 years, and is well known for his deep and rich voice. During his tenure with Chanticleer he saw the ensemble grow from a group known best in the United States to an internationally acclaimed ensemble. He has performed in many of the world's major concert venues on 6 continents, and made nearly 60 recordings which have garnered 3 GRAMMY® awards. Since then he continues to be engaged with many exceptional groups such as Seraphic Fire, the Leonids, Conspirare, the Thirteen, and Skylark.



APPENDIX:

FULL BIRTH STORY FROM 2014 BY ARTISTIC DIRECTOR MATTHEW GUARD

(Written November 20, 2014)

Carolyn and I have always loved the Robert Shaw recording of the Rachmaninoff Vespers. It was a favorite of her family for drives to Deer Isle, Maine when she was a child, and I've always played it when I wanted to just sit and "be" surrounded by something beautiful. Yesterday, it took on a whole new meaning for our family. We had our portable speaker with us in the delivery room at Piedmont Hospital yesterday, and at some point during the day, we clicked over to the Shaw Vespers recording on the Ipod, looking for something calming. The delivery did not go "as planned." (I'm sure they never do.) After ten hours of stressful rigamarole that I will not go into, there came a time when something drastic needed to be done to help dear baby and dear Carolyn finish the Herculean task at hand. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, there were ten people in our room, and the order was "we're going to the OR, stat!" The whirlwind of activity left the room in under a minute. I gave Carolyn a quick kiss goodbye and watched them leave.

Suddenly, I was in the room alone with a nurse-in-training, who helped me gather our belongings to move to a recovery waiting area. The sense of emptiness in the room was palpable, my sense of disoriented confusion and worry at its highest ever. On the counter in the corner, the beautiful choir in France continued to sing. After being told that I would not be able to go with Carolyn, because the procedure was too much of an emergency and needed to happen so quickly that she would require general anesthesia, I gathered the suitcases, the shoes, the snacks, the clothes, and the speaker, and walked some distance I'll never recall to a descriptionless recovery room where I was to wait.

The speaker kept singing on the walk. When we arrived in the room, my companion asked "Do we need to turn this off?" "No, it's fine, leave it on," was the response. It was only about 15 minutes, but it was the scariest time of my life. A non-praying man uttered some prayers for his wife and child. And the choir sang on.

Little Harry was born at 7:17 p.m. When a nurse came to see me at 7:19 or so, the sixth movement, the Bogoroditse Dyevo, which is a setting of Ave Maria that was sung at our wedding seven years ago, was coming to a close. It's a little over three minutes long. I surmised then that the Ave Maria, a hymn to the miracle of birth (although a virgin one!) was playing at the moment that Harry and mom were rescued from their ordeal.

I pressed pause to talk to the nurses who told me all was well, and who then darted to the operating room to take pictures of little Harry.

After a few frantic sobs, I regained my composure and pressed play again. The seventh movement started. Slava v vyshnikh Bogu... "Glory to God on High, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men...open thou my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise."

Ten minutes later, they brought Harry to our room. They ran his first tests, gave him a bath, and pronounced him in perfect health. I watched alone, as Carolyn was still asleep from the surgery.

After his bath, they gave Harry an adorable blanket and a little hat, and handed him to me. We sat together and waited for Carolyn for thirty minutes, just the two of us. Well, the two of us and a beautiful choir singing a beautiful piece...a meditation on beauty and the divine...a vigil. In this case, it wasn't quite all-night. But, it filled the time between when Harry was born and when he met his mother for the first time.

When they wheeled Carolyn in, the music was still playing. It had carried me through the most important hour of my life, and carried Harry through the first hour of his.

Thank you, Mr. Rachmaninoff. Thank you, Mr. Shaw. Thank you, all the lovely people who were a part of that experience. It is changing lives still today.

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