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The University Singers in collaboration with the Oratorio Society of Virginia perform Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil* to a full house at St. Thomas Aquinas

Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil with Oratorio Society of VA

Anthony Asuncion (CLAS '22)

At the start of the Spring 2022 semester, the world finally started returning to some semblance of normalcy after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. University restrictions relaxed a bit, and we were able to perform choral music for larger audiences. Professor Slon took advantage of the opportunity to reintroduce the stunning talent that the U-Singers have to offer. The monumental task, for both the U-Singers and the Oratorio Society of Virginia (the community chorus with which we collaborated) was to learn all fifteen movements of Sergei Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil (Vespers), an 75-minute a cappella masterpiece, in just three months.

If singing fifteen movements wasn't challenging enough, all the lyrics of this piece are written in Old Church Slavonic. Altos Maddy Martin (CLAS '23) and Lily Frautschi (CLAS '22) pitched in with their Cyrillic expertise, assisting with the demanding Slavonic pronunciation during the rehearsal project. Baritone Michael Bowler (CLAS '23) appreciated the experience, stating, "Singing a long piece in Old Church Slavonic was quite a unique opportunity, and I would not have predicted doing something like this before coming to UVA." Rachmaninoff's piece presented a special challenge for the basses: extremely low Bass II and III notes (a B-flat below C2 being the lowest note!). With a few happy exceptoins, most of the talented and lowest- singing basses in both choirs were unable to hit these notes. Prof. Slon addressed this issue by hiring octavist Thou Yang to sing with us on these notes. USingers bass singer Jack Siegel (CLAS '25) commented, "Mr. Yang was magical in adding a stunning depth to the choir. The low notes come naturally to him, and it was truly amazing the first time he sang that Low C in the piece's opening."

The singers tackled these obstacles and enjoyed the fruits of their labor, and many singers had different favorite moments that stood out. Bowler recounts, "I loved Movement 2's call-and response structure between chorus and alto soloist... and Movement 8's energy amidst other slower movements." Alto Megan Vandre (SEAS '24) enjoyed Movements 6 and 7 "because they embodied tranquility and serenity."

At 8:00pm on April 29th, 2022 a sold-out audience of nearly a thousand sat in the pews of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church. The singers spread across the altar, donning yellow-and-blue ribbons in solidarity with Ukraine amidst the escalating Russia-Ukraine war. The octavist and tenor soloist chanted their solos, followed by the choir chiming in with a proclamatory C-major chord on "A-miñ." The sounds enchanted all who were present as they reverberated through the vast marble space.

Following the concert, singers and their friends and family gathered in the Fellowship Hall to partake in "Sloniversary," a celebration of Professor Slon's 20 years as choral director and faculty member in the music department. It was an event that engaged the communities that supported Professor Slon in his years of teaching, and attracted both alumni and fundraising support for future U-Singers endeavors.

Just two days later, on May 1, the U-Singers (and Oratorio Society) embarked on their first performance outside of Charlottesville since 2019 to perform this piece again at Washington D.C.'s National City Christian Church, enjoying the camaraderie that helps fellow U-Singers grow closer together. As the soloists intoned their last notes, the organ interludes had been played, and the choir sang their last "Ghospodi" at the end of this marathon of a piece, the crowds at both venues stood to give the talented singers a lengthy and warm standing ovation. Singers and spectators relished in the performances, characterizing it as "ethereal," "wondrous," "breathtaking," and "awe-inspiring."

We extend our warmest and deepest thanks to the Oratorio Society and our soloists Cecilia Duarte, Jamison Walker, and Thou Yang. We want to thank those who made our concerts here in Charlottesville and in Washington, D.C. possible, most especially Tour Managers Meaghan Nuckols (CLAS '22) and Jack Kehoe (CLAS '24), and Oratorio Society Exec. Director David Perry. We also would like to thank all the wonderful people and communities who attended and listened to our concerts. Finally, we would like to thank Professor Slon for his hard work in coordinating and bringing two communities of singers together to perform such a marvelous piece of art.

Cornell Glee Club Collaboration

Amanda Hellwig (CLAS '22)

The 2021-22 academic year brought a wealth of opportunities, particularly collaborations that proved to be fulfilling, and just plain fun, for everyone involved. One of these collaborations that was especially meaningful to me was a concert performed with the Cornell University Glee Club under the direction of their interim director, Sarah Bowe. This group of about 40 tenors and basses departed on a tour of the southeast during their spring break in early April 2022, and their first stop was here in Charlottesville at St. Paul's Memorial Church. The Glee Club prepared a wonderful concert of diverse and challenging repertoire, and the U-Singers performed four pieces in the middle of the concert. We received standing ovations from several Glee Club members after performing "Bogoroditse Devo" from Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil and Jake Runestad's "Let My Love Be Heard." It was an honor to see and hear how much the members of the Glee Club appreciated our performance, as we appreciated theirs. Though they were a smaller group than usual due to the pandemic, they sang with great feeling and stylistic sensitivity across their repertoire, something the U-Singers excels at as well, under Prof. Slon's guidance. Like every Cornell Glee Club concert, they ended with a rousing set of Cornell songs, inviting Cornell alumni from the audience—there were several, traveling as far away as DC—to join in for the Evening Song (a school song not unlike our Virginia, Hail All Hail) and the Alma Mater.

This concert was especially meaningful for me because, like Prof. Slon, I went to Cornell University as an undergraduate and performed with the vocal ensembles there. As a soprano, I sang with the Glee Club's sibling group of treble voices, the Cornell University Chorus. While I have found a new home as a graduate student at UVA with the U-Singers and Chamber Singers, it felt like a home within a home singing with the CU Glee Club again—a group I had collaborated with for over three years and grown to cherish, just as I grew to love the Chorus.

Following a long-standing tradition of these groups, Prof. Bowe invited Prof. Slon and I up as alumni to sing with the Glee Club for the set of Cornell songs. I think both of us were a little rusty—thank goodness for masks which hid our mistakes—but it was a great deal of fun and incredibly heartwarming. (Prof. Slon even took a turn at his trademark 4-hand piano accompaniments to a few of the songs.) (The thing about singing in a musical ensemble during college is that music becomes a visceral part of your life, weaving itself through so many of your experiences. Once you graduate, it becomes a fond thread throughout your memories, forever tethering you to your alma mater and its choral traditions. One song can evoke so many wonderful memories—for me, walking up the Slope, or singing in a sea of red at Reunions. For my fellow UVA singers, perhaps it will be singing on the steps of the Rotunda at convocations, or standing at the top of Humpback Rocks, or swaying with each other as we sing "The Good Old Song" in Old Cabell Hall. Singing with the Cornell Glee Club, and being able to eat and chat with the singers afterwards, was a meaningful reminder of the legacies the U-Singers itself is a part of, and the impacts this experience and amazing group of people can have across generations.



Amanda joins the Cornell Glee Club in the singing of their traditional school songs

Arts on the Hill

Khuyen Dinh (CLAS '23)

"It looks like a beautiful day for Arts on the Hill with the University Singers" and a beautiful day it was. The week following fall break, the U-Singers gathered at President Jim Ryan's house on October 6th, 2022 to open the season of his annual event series titled "Arts on the Hill." Arts on the Hill began in 2020 just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, after which Pres. Ryan invited artists to share their talents virtually with his audiences. The programs continued in person in fall 2021, with artists coming from all over to share the wonders of the arts with those in attendance.

Matt Weber and Pres. Ryan opened the program with opening remarks, including a friendly jab at Professor Slon's Cornell association. With a robust program ahead, the U-Singers were excited to contribute to this immersive choral experience at Carr's Hill. The group spent the program singing through classics of their recent repertoire including "Let My Love Be Heard," "Non Nobis Domine," and other selections. The group even gave the audience a demonstration led by Prof. Slon on the magic of building chords through sections by breaking apart some measures of the seventh movement of Rachmaninoff's Vespers. The UVA Chamber Singers stepped out of the larger group to do a small performance of The Beatles' "Blackbird." Throughout the program, Prof. Slon introduced information about the group, including from where everyone was traveling to attend UVA, and the wide variety of majors represented in the group. It was an amazing introduction to the wonderful students that make up this large choir.



The University Singers fill Carr's Hill with their sound, as Pres. Jim Ryan and Vice Provost Jody Kielbasa look on

The audiences included a (literally) full house of UVA faculty and staff, students, and more. Several large donors to the group were also in attendance. The performance was covered by University Communications, including a UVA today article and Social Media, thanks to Matt Weber, Senior Advisor to the President. The group finished out the performance by inviting Jim and Katie Ryan up to the front to sing "The Good Old Song" in four part harmony along with alumni and the audience included. Singers and spectators alike spent the rest of the evening mingling, enjoying food and drink, and reveling in the wonderful performance they had just enjoyed. President Ryan was very grateful and excited to have the U-Singers perform at his home, even remarking to current singers that he was so impressed as he doesn't know how to sing himself – even auditioning for most a cappella groups at Yale and never getting in. (Though he did say he would be happy to try the whistle solo in "Blackbird.") He spent the rest of the evening joining in conversation with the singers, full of his playful remarks. When two singers complimented President Ryan's staircase as they stood to sing, he commented that they could sing there anytime. The U-Singers were so grateful to be able to have their first full performance with the NuSingers take place at such a special occasion before preparing for the rest of the 2022-23 season.

Reflection From the Class of 2025

Allison Metcalf (CLAS '25)

The entire crowd was on their feet in a sea of thunderous applause. After two years of singing to a computer screen and musically deflating, I stood in a chorus of hundreds of singers donning our black dress attire and matching masks. I was beaming; we had just finished all fifteen a cappella movements of Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil in Old Church Slavonic. Pride and exhaustion simmered through my shoulders.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt as though the reason I had originally fallen in love with choir—the connections formed through the unifying power of music—might never return. The U-Singers performed masked while indoors for the entirety of last year, and at times those masks felt as thick as a concrete wall. No matter how loudly I sang, I could only hear the reflection of my voice echoing back at me, rather than the blend of "ten thousand voices" combined. Where was the purpose, I wondered? How could the melodic captivation I craved feel so distant? But as audiences from Charlottesville and beyond shed tears to Jake Runestad's "Let My Love Be Heard," I remembered the inimitable impact music has on the community. Despite the hindrance of masks, our choir was able to emanate love and show that tribulation cannot dull our sound.



At the beginning of this year, as masked faces filled the stage for the first rehearsal, it seemed the choral world had developed a new normal. And then the powers that be lifted the mandates. We peeled off our masks, and it was like stripping off a winter jacket on the first warm day in spring. After a bleak, dark frost, we could breathe again. Exhale. Familiarity weighed on my shoulders, and I bent my knees, sinking into my shoes as if they were mud. I looked around at my choir and noted their smiles. Their smiles! I had forgotten what it was like to be able to sing beside someone and see their joy. Ironically, the elation was contagious.

Our warm-up chord resounded through the Old Cabell auditorium. It tingled in my fingertips, sizzled behind my knees. Years of choir memories flashed through my heart as our harmonies meshed in the air, shimmering like light. The energy between us radiated a warm cloud of hope.

Now, I look forward to not only sharing our sound with the world but also our expression. The connections we cultivate onstage and with our audiences are sacred. Every day, my talented and determined peers continue to astonish me, and as we grow closer as a choir, I have nothing but excitement for the future. It would be perhaps too bold and optimistic to say our troubles are behind us completely, but I have faith. We have persevered through a pandemic together and will continue to endure whatever challenges the world throws our way. U-Singers is so much more than music. It has helped me rediscover purpose. *This* is why we sing—to prove that the magic never left.

Chamber Singers Update - Defiant Requiem at Strathmore

Rachel Bohannon (CLAS '25)

"We will sing to them what we cannot say to them." This is often the mission of music: to convey a message that transcends words, to inspire something deep within the human spirit. Chamber Singers had the incredible opportunity to realize this noble mission when we joined with five other East Coast universities this past April for the 20th anniversary performance of the Defiant Requiem at the Strathmore Music Center in Maryland.

The Defiant Requiem, created and conducted by Maestro Murry Sidlin with the Defiant Requiem Foundation, combines the music of Verdi's famous Requiem with video testimonials, propaganda footage, and voice actors. It tells the story of the choir at the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp, also known as Terezín (in the Czech Republic), who courageously learned and performed this mammoth choral work out of a single smuggled score, while imprisoned by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Led by conductor and pianist Rafael Schächter, a choir of over one hundred people performed the Requiem sixteen times for the prisoners at Terezín and even the SS Soldiers who held them captive. Rehearsals for the Requiem became treasured moments of freedom from the depravity of the concentration camp, and performances symbolized defiance and courage. Schächter told his choir, "We will sing to the Nazi's what we cannot say to them," and thus, in the words of the Foundation, these brave men and women confronted "the worst of mankind with the best of mankind" through their music.

(Continues on page 5)

We spent spring 2022 preparing for this performance, a shift that required a whole new set of skills from our previous Broadway semester, and learning about the Defiant Requiem, but it wasn't until we arrived at the Strathmore for our final rehearsals that the true gravity of the project we had undertaken set in. We learned from Maestro Sidlin that Schächter would encourage his choir to continue singing in the face of suffering by promising them that one day they would perform the Requiem together in a fabulous concert hall with a full orchestra. In fact, Schächter had to reconstitute his choir three times, as sometimes half of its members were shipped away at once. Schächter himself died just months before liberation on a death march in 1945. Maestro Sidlin inspired us with their stories, telling us that it was now our mission to accomplish the vision these people never got to see, to give them a voice again, to sing anew to our audience a message of defiance.

Our performance then became about more than just musical excellence, something we always strive for, but about something so much more powerful. The words of the Dies Irae, the Day of Wrath, rang out in the hall with extra fervor, and we did not sing the final words of the Requiem in a whisper like indicated in the original score, but instead we sang "libera me," or "deliver me," in a unison fortissimo, as we decried the suffering of these victims of the Holocaust, and gave the Terezín choir the full power of our voices one last time. We then exited the hall quietly and solemnly, to the sound of a train whistle, representing the dreaded trains to Auschwitz, while humming a Jewish funeral tune. At the time of our performance, the war in Ukraine had recently started, and scenes from the atrocities committed there also played during our exit. Not only were we condemning the depravity of the past, but the depravity of the present, as well. This was one of the most impactful performances any of us will experience in our lifetime, and we all came away humbled, honored, and changed.



The Chamber Singers join other university choirs and orchestra on stage at Strathmore Music Center



Chamber Singers join for a group picture at the end of a successful performance

Since the spring, the Chamber Singers have taken on other challenging and meaningful projects. This fall semester, we performed a program dedicated to St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, including Benjamin Britten's virtuosic Hymn to St. Cecilia, and next spring we will perform as the chorus in Gluck's opera, Orfeo ed Euridice, with Victory Hall Opera, reimagined as a modern play featuring deaf actors interpreting the music on stage. Come see us then!

Considering Matthew Shepard - Spring 2023 Concert

Amanda Kopf (CLAS '23)

On October 6, 1998, Matthew Shepard, a young gay student at the University of Wyoming, was beaten and left to die in a field near Laramie, Wyoming. Matthew was in a coma when he was found the next morning and never regained consciousness before he died six days later in Fort Collins, Colorado. He was 21 years old. Matthew's death sparked a nation-wide movement pushing for state and federal hate crime legislation. President Bill Clinton made efforts to include gay people, women, and people with disabilities in federal hate crime legislation in 1999, but it was not until October 28, 2009 under President Barack Obama that the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act became federal law. In October of 2018, nine years after the legislation bearing his name was passed and 20 years after his death, Matthew's ashes were interred at a crypt in the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The ceremony was historic, as the interment of Matthew's ashes was the first of a national figure at the cathedral in 50 years.

Craig Hella Johnson, a Grammy-award-winning conductor, composer, and arranger, responded to Matthew's murder and the approaching 20th anniversary by composing the three-part oratorio Considering Matthew Shepard, which was later performed when Matthew's ashes were interred. Considering Matthew Shepard weaves contrasting musical styles with poems, excerpts from Matthew's personal journal and funeral service, quotes from interviews of Matthew's parents, and national media coverage into a powerful and impassioned choral work. Johnson's careful combination of instrumental music, choral harmony, and poetic lyrics has the unique capacity to inspire an audience to reflect upon and appreciate the weight of Matthew's life, death, and legacy. The Washington Post wrote: "[This oratorio[demonstrates music's capacity to encompass, transform and transcend tragedy." The UVA University Singers have the honor of performing Considering Matthew Shepard on April 14, 2023 under the direction of Michael Slon as we approach the 25th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's murder. "Matthew Shepard's story must never be forgotten."

In Memoriam Meg Pritchard (CLAS '12)



This past year, sadly we lost former U-Singers alto and officer Meg Pritchard. Her parents Al and Linda Pritchard relate that, "Meg's fondest memories and greatest joy was being a four-year member, and in her last year, General Manager of the celebrated University Singers. She had a fierce love for the incredible, talented, and life-long friends she made while being a part of this esteemed group. U-Singers was Meg's family and passion as a student at UVA (2008-2012) and she continued as a fervent supporter the rest of her life."

Alumni Spotlight: Chaunyuan Liu



Congrats to Chuanyuan (Eric) Liu, a 2019 UVA/U-Singers/Chamber Singers alum who returned to sing with the Chamber Singers and Victory Hall Opera in Orpheus and Erica. Chuan has also recently sung with Pittsburgh Opera and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and is a national semi-finalist in the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition.

A Letter from the Director

Dear University Singers Alumni and Friends,

Greetings from UVA! – we hope you're enjoying spring and doing well. And if this reaches you in time, come join us on April 14th for our Considering Matthew Shepard performance, and for our spring tour – from the Blue Ridge to the Big Apple!

Each year is a bit different in character. Last year, we were trying to emerge from the pandemic, and – still masked – wra pped up the season with stunning performances of the Rachmaninoff Vespers in Charlottesville and Washington D.C. in collaboration with the community chorus I lead, the Oratorio Society of VA. Hopefully some of you caught the performances or livestream (and thanks to all who participated in the Sloniversary celebration – much appreciated!) And as you'll read, Chamber Singers also joined 5 other university choirs for a powerful performance of the Defiant Requiem at the Strathmore Music Center. (More on all this in the newsletter stories.)



This year, some things are more normal and some are not. We've returned to singing w/o masks, and enjoyed getting to hear and tune our voices with their full resonance. We had successful performances for the Family Holiday Concerts, and of works by Brahms and Pärt with the Charlottesville Symphony (conductor Ben Rous paying the group a notable compliment, having them sing part of Pärt's "Da pacem Domine" a cappella for the orchestra, then saying to the instrumentalists: "Play it like they sing it!") And yet, as I also hear almost universally from colleagues at other universities, levels of student anxiety seem noticeably higher this year – perhaps in part a working out of this cultural moment, the ripples of a global pandemic, and for us here, the sad events of November 2022. Speaking of the latter, I'm proud the Singers were able to perform in the prelude for the JPJ memorial service to honor the football players – and also, to join songwriter John Kelly in recording his song "Three Bright Stars," which is available on streaming sources. We've also been able to serve the university at large this year with wonderful events such as Arts on the Hill.

As always, I have confidence in our student leaders, and the musical commitment of our Singers to bring beauty – in many ways, a healing beauty – to the stage, and to our communities. We hope you can join us soon to hear this, we welcome your direct support of our endeavors, and we thank you for being a continued part of the family which is the UVA choral program and the University Singers!

With best wishes,

Michael Slon Professor & Director of Choral Music

A Letter from the President

Dear friends and family,

It is such a pleasure to write you all as the President of such an amazing group in these times of recovery and return to normalcy. Although we were able to resume inperson singing last year, it wasn't until this semester that I felt the return of the U-Singers I remember from first year. For the first time since March 2020, we are able to sing unmasked and side by side, without a barrier between our voices and the world. We can greet our friends at every rehearsal with a smile. We can bring back traditions like retreat and pass on the institutional knowledge that only a handful of us retain

Despite all the restrictions last year, we still accomplished absolutely remarkable things. Last spring the U-Singers, together with the Oratorio Society of Virginia, performed the regional premiere of the entirety of Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil, selling out the first major performance in the newly renovated St. Thomas Aquinas Church. We also traveled outside of Charlottesville for the first time since our 2019 tour, bringing more than 90 students to perform the work in the National City Christian Church in D.C. That was not the only major work we performed last spring. The Chamber Singers traveled to the Music Center at Strathmore in Maryland to participate in a performance of Verdi's Requiem alongside 5 other major university choirs, hosted by the Defiant Requiem Foundation.



We've kept ourselves busy this Fall, opening our 65th season with a convocation performance and Rotunda sing. We finally returned to Covenant Presbyterian Church in Staunton for retreat, where less than 20 members had been before. We welcomed the largest class of new singers in recent years. These new members had their debut as U-Singers at the premier of the 3rd season of Arts on the Hill at the President's house on Carr's Hill. The Fall 2022 season included singing the Good Old Song arm in arm with Chamber Singers, The Virginia Glee Club, and Virginia Woman's Chorus at the annual family weekend Choral Showcase. The program for the fall 2022 concert in November featured performances of Brahms and Pärt as we joined the full Charlottesville Symphony for the first time since the pandemic. This collaboration continued with our Annual Holiday Concert returning in all its glory.

This spring, The U-Singers will be performing *Considering Mathew Shepard*, a modern oratorio by Craig Hella Johnson, with guest artists and orchestra. And we are very excited that this spring we are planning to go on tour for the first time since Spring 2019, allowing current fourth years to finally experience the long-awaited promises of a tour experience.

As we continue to move further towards recovery and normalcy, I am reminded of how much we have endured and accomplished in my past four years in the group. I have learned to cherish every single moment that I have with all of these wonderful people, because the next day is never guaranteed. Now, more than ever, I practice Professor Slon's sentiment to "leave it at the door." Anything that may be causing me stress or distracting me from the moment stays outside of the Old Cabell Auditorium during rehearsal. Every time I experience the 85 voices in this group bring music to life it is magical. Every second I spend with my U-Singers family is precious. A year ago, I had no idea how meaningful it would be to call myself president, but now I am reminded at every rehearsal why I do it: for the love of singing and U-Singers.

Sincerely, Kevin Duan, U-Singers President UVA Class of 2023



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For questions about making a gift to U-Singers, please email university-singers@virginia.edu

Donation for the University Singers



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Thank you for your donation!

2021-2022 Photo Album!

















Sneak peak of 2022-23 Photo Album!











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2022-2023 Season

University Singers present Considering Matthew Shepard

Friday, April 14th - 8:00 pm, Old Cabell Hall

More info at: https://music.virginia.edu/USingers-Considering-Matthew-Shepard

Join us for the Blue Ridge to the Big Apple Tour - May 2023!

5/22 - Greensboro, NC 5/26-5/27 - New York City

5/23 - East Tennessee 5/28 - Lancaster, PA

5/24 - Morgantown, WV 5/29 - Princeton, NJ

5/25 - Winchester, VA 5/30 - Virginia Beach, VA

6/3 - National Anthem performance at the Washington Nationals