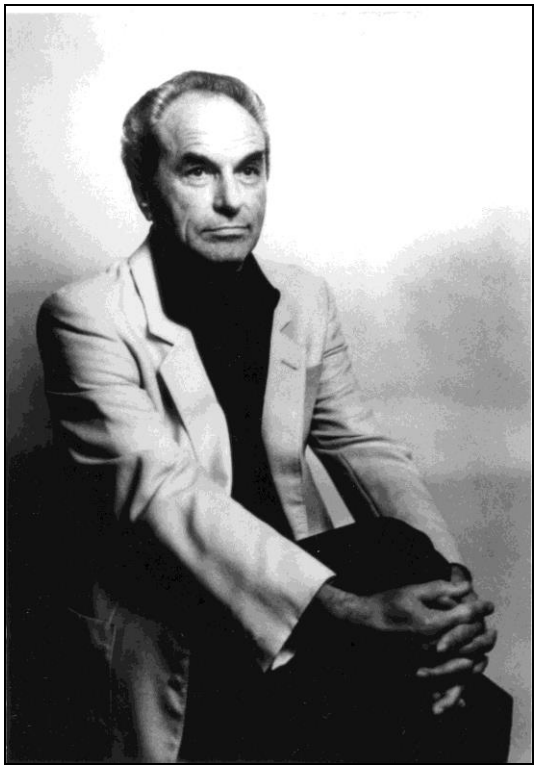
MOLTO LEGATISSIMO

At the choir's first rehearsal with Vladimir, he told the singers, "If you want people to listen to you, you must give them some of your soul."

It was the spring of 1993, and Vladimir Minin, newly arrived from Moscow, was preparing members of Oregon Repertory Singers to perform Sergei Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil* (opus 37), better known in English as the *Vespers*. The fifty-member Portland chorus had scheduled three concerts of the work under Vladimir's direction. As the choir's new administrator, my job was to organize the concerts, get Vladimir from Moscow to Oregon, and make arrangements for his stay.



Vladimir Minin, 1992

In the publicity photo his U.S. agent in Chicago sent me, Vladimir looks like a scholar. But a scholar with a natty attention to dress—light silk jacket, black turtleneck sweater, dark trousers. He has those flyaway Russian eyebrows that point upward in a

devilish way, and his graying hair rises steeply behind a receding hairline. He is slightly built, but he has a determined mouth. He sits with both hands clasped over his right knee, bringing his hands to the foreground and emphasizing the strong, flexible fingers that play such an important role in his conducting.

I had taken the job as choir administrator in August 1992. Gil Seeley, the director of Oregon Repertory Singers, had met Vladimir in Stockholm two years earlier, after hearing about him some years before, when Russian artists began to be known in the West through recordings. In 1987, musicians attending an international choral symposium in Vienna returned with rave reviews of Vladimir and the Moscow Chamber Choir, a group he had founded in 1972 (official name: Moscow State Academic Chamber Choir). Gil said he had wanted for years to perform Rachmaninoff's *Vespers* and gave me a good quote for my press release about the concerts: "I believe no one but Vladimir Minin is fully capable of unraveling all the mysteries and elusive musical style of this magnificent work, set in his native language."

In November 1992, I phoned the group that had sponsored Vladimir's previous visit to the United States, the Master Schola in Massachusetts, for information about Vladimir. I received tidbits—birth date January 10, 1929; place of birth, St. Petersburg/ Leningrad; citizenship, USSR; and a phone number. Besides the name and phone number of Vladimir's agent in Chicago, I also had contact information for a man in New Jersey named Peter Jermihov (now a distinguished American conductor specializing in Russian music). Mr. Jermihov would relay messages to another contact in Poland, who would then relay the message to Vladimir in Moscow. There was no direct telephone service to Moscow at that time, and although the first commercial Internet e-mail service had just opened, it served only a few customers.

In January 1993 (the Soviet Union had fallen almost exactly a year earlier, after Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as president and handed the Soviet nuclear missile codes to Boris Yelstin), I sent the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service in Nebraska two copies of a petition to grant Vladimir Minin an O-1 visa (extraordinary ability in the arts). One of the most honored musicians in Russia, Vladimir is a People's Artist of the Russian Federation and has won many of his nation's most coveted awards—the State Prize, the Order "For Merit to the Fatherland," the Order of Honor, the national "Triumph" award. The petition stated that he would conduct two performances of the *Vespers* in Portland and one in Eugene, about 100 miles south, which were expected to attract a total audience of 1,000. He would also conduct a one-hour choral workshop. Oregon Repertory Singers was to pay him a stipend that included airfare.

The petition was signed by me and Vladimir's agent and included testimonial letters from the executive director of the American Choral Directors Association, the president of the International Federation for Choral Music, and Gil Seeley. The visa was granted on January 25, 1993, but it was valid only until March 15, which was the date of the

performance in Eugene. I phoned the INS and learned that by law, Vladimir had ten days' leeway on either side of the dates in the visa.

Vladimir told a Portland reporter that he had been working on the *Vespers* with his choir for two years but had not yet recorded it. He had first toured the United States with the Moscow Chamber Choir in 1978, giving performances in Massachusetts, but his trip to Oregon was his first visit to the West Coast. Portland was lucky to have him, and Oregon Repertory Singers was doubly lucky for the opportunity to work under his direction. The choir's rehearsals with Vladimir were a master class in Russian choral performance practice. As for me, I had no idea when I took the job with the choir that it would give me the chance to meet an artist such as Vladimir and watch him work his magic.

The Moscow Chamber Choir, known as the "Minin choir" in Russia, is famous both for its interpretation of Russian music and for its virtuosity. It celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2012. Since I first wrote about Vladimir and his choir for Oregon Repertory Singers in 1993, more information about them has surfaced on the Internet. For example, in 2013, Vladimir recorded an interview on Russia's state-funded English-language radio service that revealed details about his life and his approach to music. And the Moscow Chamber choir now has an English-language website.

Vladimir describes his singers as an ensemble of soloists, or "choric actors." When the Minin choir debuted, in fact, critics compared it to the Moscow art theater of Konstantin Stanislavsky. At its founding, according to the radio interview, the Minin choir represented a sea-change in Russian choral music. Until that time, choirmasters in Russia and then the Soviet Union believed the voices of a choir had to sound uniform—in Vladimir's words (through an interpreter), "totally devoid of any personalized emotions."

That may have been appropriate for Russian church music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Vladimir said, but the secular choral art that appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Rachmaninoff's *Vespers*, called for new performing aesthetics: "Highly expressive singing was required, offering contrasts, highlights, and shades." What Vladimir wanted in his choir was an ensemble of soloists who could "create a distinctive sound in every part of a composition," who could convey "deep emotions and add distinctive brushstrokes to the artistic imagery." During his Portland visit, Vladimir told me that it takes four hours a day to prepare a choral singer in technique and acting.

Not only is the Moscow Chamber Choir renowned for its performances of traditional Russian music, it is also an advocate of contemporary music. Vladimir and his choir collaborated with Russian composer Georgy Sviridov on *Pushkin's Garland*, for example, and the composer Valery Gavrilin wrote his large-scale choral symphony *Chimes* especially for Minin's choir. Although thoroughly modern in sound, *Chimes* is

based on Russian folklore. Vladimir told his radio interviewer that he had gained insight as a child into the rural life that Gavrilin's symphony evokes during summer-long visits to his great-grandfather's village. "My very first impressions of rural life were the scents, the scent of freshly baked bread," he said. "Village songs. The peasant folk returning from cutting the hay, and the village get-togethers."

The Minin choir was chosen to sing the Russian national anthem during the closing ceremonies of the XXI Olympic Games in Vancouver in 2010. That same year, Vladimir and his singers ventured into the world of pop music, when they recorded the song "Fragile" by the rock musician Sting. "What I like in Sting's music is its thoughtfulness," said Vladimir. "I also like the idea in 'Fragile' that any violence is senseless. This idea warms my heart because I survived the Second World War and I know what war is like." Vladimir especially liked Sting's approach: "He sings not for your muscles but for your heart."

Vladimir said in his radio interview that he started singing in choirs at the age of seven. He was evacuated from Leningrad to a village during the war, and by the time he returned, both his parents had died. Vladimir said that the Russian conductor Alexander Sveshnikov "intercepted" him and other homeless boys in Moscow and made a home for them at his new Moscow Choral School for Boys. "Those were the war years, everyone was on the brink of starvation," said Vladimir. "But Sveshnikov found a way to get our life on track. He managed to get beds for us, chairs, and tables. There were ten of us in the class. Only two are alive today."

Vladimir graduated from the Moscow Choral School in 1945 and entered the Moscow Conservatory, where he still teaches choral conducting. Vladimir went on to lead several choirs—the State Academic Russian Chorus of the USSR, the Song and Dance Ensemble of the Soviet Army in Poland, the Doina choir in Moldova, the Leningrad State Academic Capella Choir (founded in 1479)—and to teach at the Novosibirsk State Conservatory before becoming rector of the Gnessin Institute in Moscow. In 1972, Vladimir assembled students, postgraduates, and teachers at the institute into an amateur chamber chorus. But when large numbers of the choir disappeared, predictably, after the school year ended, he recruited professional vocalists and transformed the Moscow Chamber Choir into a professional group.

I met Vladimir on March 1, 1993, the day he arrived in Portland. That afternoon, a Monday, I bought a bouquet of nine irises and three yellow gerberas, then joined Jeri, the choir president, and Marina, the Russian interpreter we had engaged, for the drive to the airport. Vladimir landed at 5:30 p.m. and we drove him to the Mallory Hotel, where Gil met us. After an embarrassing moment at the desk, where the clerk demanded to be paid in advance, we repaired to Vladimir's room. He pronounced the accommodations "luxe."

The window looked out on downtown Portland and when the clouds lifted, you could see flat-topped Mt. Saint Helens across the river in Washington. Saint Helens was one of the most beautiful volcanoes in the world before it erupted in May 1980. Now it looks like a gigantic blancmange, or baked Alaska.

It rained the next day, the day of the first rehearsal with Vladimir. The choir had prepared for the concert under Gil's direction, and they would perform the *Vespers* in Russian, using a version transliterated into the English alphabet from the Cyrillic of the original Church Slavonic text. The edition was a new one published in 1992 by Musica Russica in Connecticut. From the first moments of the rehearsal, Vladimir established that he is a great artist. He conducted with his whole body, communicating to the singers through his eloquent face, eyes, hands, and voice. The choir often understood his meaning before Marina could translate.

Vladimir Minin conducting, 2007
(photo courtesy Wikipedia commons)

Vladimir had the formidable task of making our group of American singers sound Russian, and in only six rehearsals. At the choir's last rehearsal before Vladimir arrived, I told them a story I heard from a choir director in Eugene. The previous year, a director from Irkutsk, Eugene's "sister city," had been in town, and his host played the Robert Shaw Chorale's recording of the *Vespers*. The Russian listened for a few minutes, then shook his head. "It's very nice," he said, "but it's not Russian."

Oregon Repertory Singers had been listening to Russian pronunciation tapes, but they had much to learn from Vladimir. One of the first ideas they had to absorb was that

the bass and alto voices dominate in Russian choral music. In the West, the sopranos and tenors are the stars. Vladimir also immediately introduced the choir to the Russian style of legato singing, with the phrase *molto legatissimo* (the very most legato) becoming his trademark (though ungrammatical Italian) slogan. The Russian style was difficult for the choir, but the singers caught on, and the change in their sound was astounding. At the end of his visit, the choir gave Vladimir a sweatshirt with MOLTO LEGATISSIMO printed on it.

Rain continued on Wednesday. I drove Vladimir to an interview with a reporter from the *Oregonian* newspaper, then sent a check to Aeroflot to change the date of his return flight from New York to Moscow. He was originally booked to return the day before the Eugene concert. Partly because of the weather and partly because Vladimir was as yet unfamiliar to Portland audiences, only a small crowd attended the reception I had organized at a local pub that evening.

In the midst of everything, I was editing the program notes, which explained that the *Vespers* was first performed in Moscow on March 10, 1915, as a benefit for war relief. The work is scored for a cappella choir, in keeping with the Russian Orthodox Church's ban on musical instruments during worship. Rachmaninoff's composition is a concert version of a Russian Orthodox service, the All-Night Vigil, a celebration of Christ's resurrection. The service is performed every Saturday and on the eve of every important feast. It generally lasts only two or three hours, rather than all night.

Rachmaninoff created the *Vespers* from various chants used in the Russian Orthodox liturgy, plus six imitation chants he himself composed—what he called "conscious counterfeits." In addition to the vespers (the first part of the All-Night Vigil), Rachmaninoff also used parts of the matins and prime sections. The *Vespers* consists of fifteen movements:

1. Приидите, поклонимся (*Priiditye, poklonimsya*), "Come, let us worship."
2. Благослови, душе моя, Господа (*Blagoslovi, dushe moya, Ghospoda*), "Bless the Lord, O my soul."
3. Блажен муж (*Blazhen muzh*), "Blessed is the man."
4. Свете тихий (*Svete tihiy*), "Gladsome light."
5. Ныне отпущаеши (*Nïne otpushchayeshï*), "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace" (*Nunc dimittis*).
6. Богородице Дево (*Bogoroditse devo*), "Rejoice, O Virgin."
7. Малое славословие (*Maloye slavosloviye*), the Lesser Doxology.
8. Ҳвалите имя Господне (*Hvalite imia Ghospodne*), "Praise the name of the Lord."
9. Благословен еси, Господи (*Blagosloven yesi, Ghospodi*), "Blessed art thou, O Lord."

10. Воскресение Христово видевше (*Voskreseniye Hristovo videvshe*), “Having beheld the resurrection of Christ.”
11. Величит душа моя Господа (*Velichit dusha moya Ghospoda*), “My soul magnifies the Lord.”
12. Славословие великое (*Slavosloviye velikoye*), the Great Doxology.
13. Днесъ спасение (*Dnes spaseniye*), “Today salvation has come.”
14. Воскрес из гроба (*Voskres iz groba*), “Thou didst rise from the tomb.”
15. Взбранной воеводе (*Vzbrannoy voyevode*), “To you, victorious leader.”

Thursday was hot and rainy. At the rehearsal, we had a substitute translator and things did not go well. Vladimir told the choir they sounded lazy. On the way out the door afterward, he said he did not want to perform the last movement of the *Vespers* because “it’s not appropriate to the liturgy.” I had a (silent) fit because I was in the last stages of preparing the program for printing, but I went home and deleted No. 15. The choir would also not perform No. 13 but would add as its finale the traditional “Many Years” blessing (*Mnogolyetiye*), taken from Rachmaninoff’s *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* and traditionally sung at the end of Russian Orthodox services. The concert would begin with an opening exclamation by the choir’s bass and tenor soloists, acting the parts of the deacon and priest in the traditional All-Night Vigil service.

Friday was hot again. Vladimir gave an interview to the weekly newspaper *Willamette Week* that afternoon, and Jeri had a party for Vladimir at her house that evening. I missed it because I worked late on the program, which had to be pasted up by hand—computerized layout and design was still in its infancy. I did the work at the Kinko’s down the street from my studio apartment cum office.

Saturday turned out sunny and warm. A freelance photographer came to the rehearsal to take photos for the *Oregonian* article, and one of the board members brought me salmon from Jeri’s party. Vladimir showed absolute focus in his work, expressive use of his entire body, yet economy of gesture. The choir worked on just one movement of the *Vespers*, the Great Doxology (No. 12). Vladimir was eloquent about the significance to the Russian soul of earth, mother, water, God. He said that “O Lord, have mercy on us” has real meaning for Russians, who feel that God is the only thing they can hope in. The choir was still singing individual notes, when what Vladimir wanted was motion, direction. He was trying to get the choir members to sing with their whole bodies, with their souls.

The *Vespers* is essentially a choral symphony, one in which Rachmaninoff treats the choir like an orchestra and the voices like instruments. Singing the work requires flexibility, control, precise articulation, a variety of vocal tones, and responsiveness to

changes in tempo—in short, the ability to turn on a dime. The mood of the *Vespers* ranges from contemplative to martial, and the music features dramatic dynamic changes, with fortissimos sinking in two or three measures to pianissimos. Musical lines proceed up and down the scale, as in chanting, rhythms are fluid, and sustained notes are often hummed. The chorus may be divided into five or six parts (at one point, eleven), and the pitch range is wide.

The end of No. 5 (Rachmaninoff's favorite part of the *Vespers*, which he wanted performed at his funeral but which was not done) features a famous low B-flat in the bass line. Nearly every write-up about the *Vespers* includes the following story: When Rachmaninoff played the end of No. 5 for Nicolai Danilin, who conducted the first performance of the *Vespers*, Danilin exclaimed, "Now where on earth are we to find such basses? They are as rare as asparagus at Christmas!"

By the end of the Saturday rehearsal, which lasted three hours, Vladimir was exhausted and begged off a planned visit to the local Russian Orthodox church. The priest and parishioners supported the *Vespers* concerts because of the work's relation to the Russian Orthodox liturgy. On Sunday, the board held a reception for area choir directors at the house of one of the board members. Monday was the full moon. Tuesday was warm enough to wear sandals. Rehearsal that night was at the Portland concert venue, St. Philip Neri Church, on the east side of the Willamette River.

The printed program was ready the next day, and Vladimir's new Aeroflot ticket arrived. I contacted the University of Oregon students who had volunteered to help at the concert in Eugene, and worried about risers. Should we take ours? Should we use the university's? I phoned Mother, who told me the Eugene Gleemen, the group my father had sung in, always traveled with its own risers.

Thursday was sunny and clear, the mountains gleaming with snow. Rehearsal was terrific, and everyone was pleased at the advance copy of the article for Friday's *Oregonian*. The interviewer wrote that Vladimir did not find out about the *Vespers* until 1954, when a librarian gave him a copy, because performing the work in the Soviet Union was forbidden under the Communists.

Rachmaninoff wrote the *Vespers* during World War I. Minin said, "He wanted to express his concern about the fate of Russia. . . . Rachmaninoff was praying for the country." According to Vladimir, "At the first performance, Rachmaninoff hugged the conductor, Nicolai Danilin, and told him, 'I didn't even know I'd written such wonderful music.'"

Friday was overcast and cold. I was feeling more and more tired. On the phone, I complained to a friend in Los Angeles about having so much work to do (not only organizing the concerts but also selling tickets, issuing press releases, placing ads, preparing the printed program, working late every night), and she said, "But work's your

life, isn't it?" which is pretty much true. Another friend in Los Angeles sent me a huge bouquet of purple, blue, and pink flowers—belladonna, iris, celosia, snapdragons, carnations. The dress rehearsal went well even though it lasted longer than Vladimir had promised.

Saturday, the day of the first concert, was cold and rainy. Vladimir had agreed to run a workshop in Lake Oswego, a few miles south of Portland. My car acted up on the way, struggling up hills and sounding asthmatic. The concert that night was a sell-out, requiring us to put folding chairs along the walls. The crowd loved it, though the singers had pitch problems. Someone in the audience said they thought they were hearing "interesting harmonic modulations." Vladimir kissed my hand when I handed him a single red rose during the standing ovation. He was proud that the tuxedo he had had made in Berlin many years before still fit him.

The rain continued on Sunday. Vladimir was in the parking lot when the singers walked on because they had not waited for my cue, but the concert was a huge success. The intonation problems were largely solved, and the crowd was standing room only. Afterward we had a cast party at Bridgeport Brew Pub next to the railroad tracks in Northwest Portland. My brother Fred came and tried to talk to Vladimir in German.

On Monday, the choir set off in buses for Eugene while I drove down in a blinding rainstorm, then chased around town trying to find roses for Vladimir and the soloists. I thought the Eugene concert was the best, even though the sound engineer dismissed it because he could hear the rain on the church roof. The choir seemed at one with Vladimir, responding to his every gesture, every change of tempo. All the nuances he had worked so hard to achieve were present that night. I continued to find No. 5, *Nïne otpushchayeshï* ("Lord, now let your servant depart in peace"), the most moving. Not until I listened to the tape years later while following the score did I realize that the tenor had skipped a measure at the beginning of his solo—Vladimir and the choir had covered the mistake perfectly.

Vladimir signed scores for the singers after the concert, then went to a reception at the home of the president of the Oregon Bach Festival. I went too and brought Mother with me. The house was on University Street, one of the streets I had walked down regularly in grade school and college. The buffet table featured salad, salmon, asparagus, and fruit. The fire in the fireplace was welcome on such a stormy night.

The next day, I drove Vladimir back to Portland in another downpour, and he and I had our picture taken at Marina's house. Afterward, my car refused to start, so Marina's daughter drove us all to lunch. Then, once Vladimir had packed his bags, she picked up one of the board members and drove us to the airport. Gil and two of the singers met us there, along with Marina and her husband. Vladimir and I hugged and kissed each other on the cheek and he said *spasiba* ("thank you") several times.

Vladimir with me at Marina's house, March 16, 1993

Vladimir's plane left at 5:40 in the evening. I went home and collapsed.

The problem with Vladimir's visa had made me nervous. Would a literal-minded, overzealous passport official look at the visa and decide it had expired on March 15? But Vladimir departed the country without incident, and he and his MOLTO LEGATISSIMO sweatshirt made it safely back to Moscow. For a week after Vladimir left, I felt shaky and tired, as if I had the flu. A month later, I resigned my position.

Two years later, Vladimir came back to Portland for another performance of the *Vespers* with Oregon Repertory Singers. I regretted not having recorded the rehearsals in 1993 and, though I was no longer the administrator, I had the idea of making a videotape during this visit. I wanted scenes of Vladimir telling the chorus they must sing the music from their souls, a private session with one of the soloists, a before-and-after sequence illustrating how the choir's sound and rhythm changed under Vladimir's direction, a

scene of Vladimir singing to demonstrate a musical point, the chant with which the choir ended the *Vespers*, and the audience breaking into European-style synchronized clapping afterward, as had happened in 1993, adding to the concert's thrill. The tape would be called "Sing with Soul: Portrait of Vladimir Minin."

Four of with an interest in the choir met to discuss my idea. We figured a ten-minute finished tape would require at least one hundred minutes of footage, a crew of two for three hours, plus cameras and mikes, and ten hours of editing. We estimated the total cost at $5,000. We discussed using the Portland Art Museum's film school, getting a grant from U.S. Bank, and using the video facilities at local high schools and community colleges. Also getting endorsements from experts such as James DePriest, conductor of the Oregon Symphony, Robert Shaw of the Robert Shaw Chorale, or Dale Warland of the Dale Warland Singers. And meeting with Will Vinton, the animation genius and founder of the Portland Creative Conference.

I had zero experience in filmmaking and only the most tenuous of contacts to filmmakers, so nothing came of the meeting. But I wanted to make some kind of record of Vladimir's work. When rehearsals of the *Vespers* with Vladimir began in February 1995, I went to all of them and took detailed notes, which I then edited into the text below. Marina was again Vladimir's translator, so the quoted statements are Marina's renderings into English of Vladimir's Russian.

Vladimir rehearsing Oregon Repertory Singers, 1995
(photo by Steve Nehl, *The Oregonian*)

1.

Wednesday, February 15. At the first rehearsal, held in the auditorium of Lewis and Clark College, Vladimir tells the choir that his wife recognized MOLTO LEGATISSIMO on the sweatshirt they gave him the last time he was in Portland. Then he begins

working. He has the choir sing *do*, *re*, *mi*, etc., up and down the scales. He tells them, "You sound timorous—be more courageous, pronounce the consonants."

"It should be as strong at the end as at the beginning."

"Your whole body should resonate, from heel to head." He points to his head and his stomach.

Vladimir starts at the end of the *Vespers*, No. 15 ("To you, victorious leader"), a hymn of thanks to Mary, the mother of God, which Vladimir omitted from the 1993 concerts. No. 14 ("Thou didst rise from the tomb"), which ended the 1993 concert, is a contemplative hymn. By contrast, No. 15 is dramatic, rhythmic, energetic, moving most of the time in a four-four marching beat. A series of climaxes ends in a fortissimo *raduysia* ("rejoice"), after which the pace slows and the notes run down the scale to a soft major third (C-E) chord at the end.

Vladimir says to watch how the syllables resonate (*Vzbran-noy-voy-ye-vo-de po-be-di-tel-na-ya*). "It should be sung as though pipes are sounding, a musical instrument is playing—a trumpet." He calls attention to the parts imitating each other throughout: *imitazi*. He tells the singers, "You breathe too relaxed. You need strong muscles, not Jell-O." To get support, he says to them, "Imagine a spring inside you."

Just after the beginning, the sopranos and altos have a series of running eighths. Vladimir tells them: "Don't push the first eighth at the expense of the second. It needs to be distinct." He taps on the piano lid to keep the eighths running. "What is lacking? Intensity." Where the soprano line is high, Vladimir cautions that the altos must be the solo, that the sopranos must not overpower them.

Later he says: "When I stop my hand, I'm waiting for you to do something. Don't wait for me." "Don't take breaths between notes. Watch my hands." He conducts with his right hand over his left, as if playing a violin: "Don't let go of the notes."

"I thought only the Russian school of singing had its drawbacks. The American school does too. The tenors are doing exactly what Russian tenors do" **[**sliding from note to note**].**

In the measures leading to *raduysia*, he instructs: "Don't diminuendo as though you were begging, asking for alms. Don't force. Sing with inspiration, not louder. Do a diminuendo majestically." Vladimir demonstrates a diminuendo with intensity. "This is the hardest part of the piece," he says. "The audience must feel at the end that you want them to rejoice. If you don't, you can cancel everything you've done before." Rule: Basses are always the last to diminuendo in Russian music.

"Most important: when it says piano, sing with inspiration. Americans connect piano with being lax. I was taught that piano is forte under pressure."

(We hear a gamelan orchestra rehearsing elsewhere in the building. Vladimir says, "That reminds me of how we play in Kazakhstan—on one string.")

Next he rehearses No. 13, the troparion (short hymn) "Today salvation has come." Like No. 14, also a troparion, the piece is slow, contemplative. Vladimir says the opening should be dolcissimo, "on tiptoe," spiritual, not materialistic. "You're crescendoing—I need spirit." To the sopranos: he points to his throat—*nyet*— then to his abdomen.

"One more time." This becomes another of Vladimir's mantras.

"These last three movements are difficult because choirs don't usually sing both No. 13 and No. 14. We need to sing them differently. No. 15 needs to be completely different from both of them, like trumpets. It requires technique to switch, to be flexible, like mercury."

After a break, Vladimir turns to No. 9 ("Blessed art thou, O Lord"). The piece dramatizes the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. It begins with the refrain *Blagosoven yesi, Ghospodi, nauchi mia opravdaniyem Tvoim* ("Blessed art thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes"), sung by the low voices. The altos and sopranos then come in with a hymn, the story of women who carry myrrh to the tomb of Christ and find an angel. The second verse is a hymn that announces, "The Savior has risen." In the third verse, the women's voices create an ethereal sound, and the angel (tenor) tells them not to weep but to announce the resurrection. The fifth verse begins calmly with the women's voices, then the dynamics and rhythm become more dramatic, as the singers cry "with the seraphim" the words *Sviat, Sviat, Sviat, yesi Ghospodi* ("Holy, Holy, Holy art thou, O Lord"). A series of *alleluia*s closes the piece.

Vladimir says, "The opening is one sentence, it can't be broken. You should be stern. It's like a death march." He tells the singers, "It's too tender. I want stern singing. Struggling through the thorns of consciousness."

"Don't give the sound away. Try to keep it inside of you."

2.

Thursday, February 16. Vladimir starts the second rehearsal with No. 1, the call to worship. Rachmaninoff establishes the texture of the entire work in this opening movement—chantlike vocal lines, dramatic changes of tempo, sudden crescendos and pianissimos.

Vladimir tells the choir, "I don't want to lead you, I want you to be with me."

"I have the impression that on the piano passages you're dying. Remember: piano equals forte under pressure."

"Think about the eighths as you sing. Try to imagine it's one person singing and addressing millions. You're doing the opposite. You need to articulate majestically, actively, to be heard."

Come, let us worship God, our King.
Come, let us worship and fall down
before Christ, our King and our God.
Come, let us worship and fall down
before Christ Himself, our King and our God.
Come, let us worship and fall down before Him.

"The sounds you're producing don't correspond to the meaning of the words. *Christus* should be said with awe. You're saying it calmly, dispassionately. There's an element

of fright in the idea of God. Act it out, even if you don't feel it. You say *Christus* as though you were talking to a neighbor."

"Your edition has all these bar lines. Mine doesn't. The result is that you're singing as if this was European music. This is not European music. It's based on ancient chants. One note could take a whole page. The longer the syllable, the more importance in the piece. Think of phrases. The phrases end where I pause. Mark these."

"When you say the word *nashemu*, switch from fear of God to love." Vladimir says the Russian attitude toward God is a mix of fear and love.

"Mark syllables *na-, Bo-, Chri-*. These I want you to pay special attention to."

"Tempo, tempo, tempo!"

"Keep tension in the long phrases from beginning to end." Vladimir wants the singers to control their breathing so as to add an open, dark color: "When you take a quick breath, change the coloring of the sound." He wants them to pronounce consonants quickly and hard or softly and gently.

He reminds them: "Sopranos have to sing softer than other parts. Sorry, but Rachmaninoff wrote the soprano line for boys."

"It was pretty good and I have hope that you'll sing better when it counts."

Next is No. 3 ("Blessed is the man"). Vladimir says that three tenors and six altos should sing the first phrase, then the whole choir will come in on *alleluia*. That is because in Russian churches, the first phrase is sung by the left side, the *alleluia* by the right.

"The first phrase should be soft, the second is a chant," Vladimir says. "The third *alleluia* is the most important. Rhythm is the main factor. The Bible begins with the words, 'There was darkness.' I would begin with, 'There was rhythm.'"

"Sing *alleluia* as though you hear it from afar. The feeling is budding, not ripe yet, still inside." He demonstrates moving toward the final *alleluia*. "Always connect the last consonant to the following vowel. Pronounce consonants very close to the vowel."

Vladimir says that intonation in Russian doesn't mean pitch but rather subtext—"inflection," says one of the sopranos. "The subtext should be different every time."

"The eighths need to be marcato. Pronounce two ells in *alleluia*. The ell should have a dark color." Vladimir demonstrates. "The vowel in *-ia* should be identical to that in *slava*."

"Going from piano to forte is to go from something hidden to openness. When going from mezzoforte to piano, the tension must remain. The vowel *a* in *alleluia* should be hard. The energy must change from active to passive rapidly." Vladimir conducts like he's priming a pump, driving. The choir gets it. "Absolutely correct!" Vladimir says.

They sing from the beginning. "On the opening phrase, don't wha-wha like a baby in a crib. The tone needs to be continuous. Let's do it again. The last time was so beautiful you need to suffer a bit."

He goes over No. 13 and No. 15: "To refresh our memories."

No. 13: “The beginning should be mystical. Your beginning is too much like reality.”

“Sopranos, listen to other voices in the opening. Think what sound you’ll add to the singing.”

“Your crescendos and diminuendos are too abrupt. You should do them as though the air is vibrating.”

“Sopranos need to sing as though you’re telling a fairy tale, very mysterious.”

“When you approach a break, diminuendo right away.”

“The train has left” (you’re late).

“I understand you’re tired. But I still want you to sing No. 15. Make it rhythmic but don’t bounce.”

3.

Saturday, February 18. Vladimir, wearing an argyle plaid vest over his black shirt, praises the choir for its work so far. The translator thinks he is being sarcastic because he uses such unusual words, addressing the choir as if it was a single person. He tells the choir, “The reason Chaliapin was different from every other singer was that one part was singing while the other was checking on the singer.”

They rehearse No. 9 for the second time. The tenors have a solo line (*Pochto mira s milostivnmi slezami*) in the second verse. Vladimir demonstrates consonants, color, articulation. For example, he pronounces both consonants in *s mi-*.

The baritones lag. Vladimir claps his hands, taps his foot.

When they reach the phrase, *Vidite vi grob* (“Look at the tomb”), he says, “I want the consonant in *vi* very distinct. It’s a form of address (‘you’).”

The verse ends with the words *Spas bo voskrese ot groba* (“The Savior is risen from the dead”). Vladimir says, “Don’t rush me here. Sing *groba* molto legatissimo” (he sings to demonstrate). He notes that *spas* means “savior.” He sings again to demonstrate what he wants the choir to do. He adjusts the relative volume on *spas*, having everyone sing pianissimo except the baritones.

“*Groba* is one word, you broke it into two. I understand you’re tired and I forgive you. But music is above all.”

The next measure is another iteration of the refrain. It starts quietly but the rhythm is driving. “You need to think ahead. I don’t want this staccato.”

The pitch sags. “Okay, there’s an element of tiredness here. Can we stand?”

Choir: “*Da*.”

Vladimir moves his right arm like a windmill, to keep the refrain moving, like cranking an engine. “Pronounce more maturely. You’re pronouncing in a childish way. Also, it’s one phrase, don’t break it up.”

Gil, Vladimir, the translator, and the accompanist huddle, decide to do something easier. They choose No. 6 ("Rejoice, O Virgin"), a movement that epitomizes Vladimir's molto legatissimo. It features a thrilling climax in the middle, then a hushed, slow ending.

Vladimir has the choir hum the notes first. "Again, but keep it legato (he demonstrates) like a violin, or three violins."

Gil: "I love it when the choir sings with its mouth closed." Much laughter.

The sopranos sing alone. Vladimir claps. "You can do this. You've been concealing the fact so far" (laughter, boos).

"I want you to do something impossible. I want you to sing the words with the same sound as humming." The pitch sags again.

"You remembered this pretty well, but there are some details to work out."

The altos have a solo entrance (*Blagoslovenna Ti v zhenah*, "Blessed art thou among women"). Vladimir tells them, "The tempo should remain the same, but the speed of articulation changes. You need to make the second refrain more interesting, different from the first. Otherwise, the audience will fall asleep." The altos try again. "Quite right, quite right."

Gil says, "I'm satisfied with this movement." Vladimir asks them to sing the last four measures: "There's something you're still missing." Vladimir sings. "These four measures are one and the same phrase." He slows the tempo in the next-to-last measure.

Vladimir returns to No. 3. The choir sings the first few measures. He shakes his head. "Try to remember. There was a book, *Khrushchev Remembers*."

"Good, but you're lagging behind me." He stops them. "Nothing will work out if the Russian words keep interfering with your singing. Trust is the most important." Vladimir stands with his arms straight at his sides and tips from side to side, conducting with his body.

"I was thinking at home of another image that would help you do the transition from one *alleluia* to the next. The situation is when a blind man is being operated on, to recover his vision, to see light he's never seen in his life. This is what I think he must feel the moment before he will see for the first time—the moment before the bandages come off. It's not a question of being loud, but of being excited. Mark it. So next time, you'll sing exactly the way I want it."

A bass asks, "Does he see during this piece?"

Vladimir: "He sees at *slava*. Do you understand the word *slava*?"

Choir: "Glory."

Vladimir: "You're absolutely right, but I want the audience to understand/feel the feeling of the blind man. I love the way Frank Sinatra pronounces words. Even though I don't know English, I think I know what he's singing about."

"I don't really like to go to the Russian orthodox church. I go there very seldom. I'm extremely, terribly irritated by the Russian choirs. I see singing as a passionate

expression of one person's feelings to another. When I hear this kind of whining (he demonstrates), I feel sick. This is why I want you to get an idea of what Russian Orthodox singing should be. Unfortunately, these traditions are dead in Russia. After we're done rehearsing, I'll tell you a story."

They turn to No. 2 ("Bless the Lord, O my soul**"**). The piece, whose text is from Psalm 103, features an alto solo singing a traditional chant while the choir sings chords and hums drones. The upper voices chant the refrain *Blagosloven yesi, Ghospodi* ("Blessed art thou, O Lord"; also the refrain in No. 9) between each of the alto's phrases. At the end, the basses descend to a low C (but not as low as they reach in No. 9).

Vladimir tells the choir, "I want you to create the impression that you're singing very slowly. When I hold the sound out, it gives the impression that I'm singing slow. There's a Russian saying, 'Precision is the way of the king.' Be precise, but with an air of carelessness, as if it took no effort. I like the way the tenors do it."

The pitch sags. "Where are your ears?"

To the sopranos: "Good, but you lost your royal dignity."

"Gil, I'm tired." Vladimir and choir applaud each other.

Gil: "I thought you'd go on all day."

Vladimir: "I could go on, but I don't think I'd be much use. My ears are tired."

Vladimir tells the story he promised earlier: In 1913, Russia was celebrating the three hundredth anniversary of the Romanov family. Tsar Nicholas II was supposed to be in Moscow for Easter. The Choir of the Holy Synod was supposed to sing—sixty boys, thirty men. Six were low basses. Danilin was the director. He wasn't paying attention to the church requirements. The choir sang with passion, never encouraged in the Russian Orthodox Church. The singers are not supposed to interfere with prayer. Empress Alexandra was a nervous woman, had a volcanic disposition. One part of the service was the so-called cherub singing. One part is slow and quiet, the other is passionate. During the second part, the empress fainted. After the service, Nicholas wanted to talk to the director. Danilin was short and sturdy, almost square. (Vladimir demonstrates.) He was generally calm, but he became anxious because the Tsar wanted to talk to him. Nicholas took off his ring. "This is for you, for your talent. But the next time we come here, I want you to cut down on the passion, because our mother the empress fainted."

Vladimir says, "This really happened. I want to give it as an example of how choirs in the past sang with passion. I apologize for the stories I tell you. Now I'm concerned that if my choir comes to Portland, we won't live up to the mark."

4.

Tuesday, February 21. Vladimir wears a tan shirt and the same vest, pants, and shoes as last time. He sounds hoarse and Marina has a cough. The singers sound tired and flat.

The choir has not yet rehearsed No. 12, the Great Doxology, with Vladimir, though they have prepared it with Gil, and many choir members also sang with Vladimir in 1993.

This long movement is the most dramatic of the *Vespers*, starting simply and building momentum through contrasting textures, changing keys, and conflicting meters to a climax that never fails to give me goose bumps.

Vladimir directs the singers through the first section, during which the altos have the melody, then, "Stop. Altos, it wasn't bad at all, but I want you to pronounce the consonants hard."

Vladimir sings the phrases. "There are several points. The end of the phrase comes from the sense, not the music. This is why when you're singing, you change the meaning somewhat."

Vladimir complains about altos getting softer when sopranos come in. The section leader explains that it's because the second sopranos, who were singing with the altos, dropped out. Vladimir wants the seconds to continue and the first sopranos to split into two parts.

When the sopranos and tenors come in for the first time over the alto solo line, Vladimir tells them: "Think of the second note as an echo, but don't swoop—like bells tolling in the distance."

"*Nyet*. Don't crescendo on the first note. Hit it, then diminuendo. Think of something hitting a bell, gently." Vladimir demonstrates pressure on the first beat, off on the next.

They try. "Good—but."

He has them sing on syllables from the beginning. "Now I want you to sing the words exactly the same way." He instructs them to hold out the vowel at the end of the phrase and elide the consonant with the following word. "We have lots of work to do today. Let's move faster."

"We don't have time to continue practicing this part. Maybe we could meet earlier next time. I'm not that naive to think that everybody would practice at home by themselves."

Gill suggests that they stand. Vladimir stops them. "I want you to continue the way you were."

At the end of the first section, he tells the choir: (1) "You take breaths very noisily—it's impossible." (2) "Everyone should sing pianissimo except basses. Listen carefully to the basses and form your own parts."

Section 2 is marked staccato: "Even though Rachmaninoff has marked to sing it short, it doesn't mean there should be holes between the sounds."

The basses have a forte entrance (*Blagosloven yesi, Ghospodi*): "When the basses come in, you need to sing in whispers. Now that at least half the choir didn't know where we were starting, I could hear the basses fine."

On the line *Budi, Ghospodi, milosi, Tvoya na nas* ("Let thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us"): "Sing as though you were telling God you had only one hope left."

"No." Vladimir demonstrates. "Complete contrast with how you were singing before."

"No." He pounds the piano. "Sopranos, I understand that you always want to sing the melody. You have your chance, but not here. Again." Vladimir smiles and bows to

sopranos. “Stop. It seems that you are relaxed and enjoying yourselves.” He snaps his fingers. “The meter is still there.” They sing. Vladimir taps with an open hand on the piano.

This part ends with the phrase *yakozhe upovahom na Tia* (“as we have set our hope on Thee”). Vladimir tells the choir, “You are my only hope.”

The sopranos enter, divided into three parts, singing first a long line, then duples against triples in the alto line. The sopranos lag. Vladimir checks the interval—they are flatting. He tells the sopranos, “The sound should be inside you. Let me show you” (he covers the tone).

“Keep in mind that when the basses come in, I want everybody to listen.”

Leading up to a climax: “Increase in expression, not dynamics, but expressiveness.”

The tenors echo the soprano line. He tells them: “There should be excitement here.”

“Good job, tenors.” To the sopranos: “They’re doing it more placidly, and with more diminuendo. You weren’t listening to the tenors.” To the tenors and basses: “Very good.”

The baritones have a solo entrance while the other parts sing pianissimo: “It’s the same melody, sung by different parts.”

Vladimir is slowly increasing the tempo, but, “You’re slowing down. There are holes.”

“OK—guys only. I need the rhythm. Tenors like bells ringing, basses tolling.”

“When I say soft, I don’t mean use a whiny voice.”

A section marked più mosso comes next. “Different parts sing differently here. Sopranos and altos piano, men like bells tolling.”

Beginning of the final section: *Sviatiy Bozhe, Sviatiy Krepkiy, Sviatiy Bessmertniy, pomiluy nas* (“Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us”), with its strong rhythm driving to the soaring climax. Vladimir says to push on beat three but not to crescendo on *Bozhe*.

“Sing as if you were singing Christmas carols. Joyfully. Tenors, don’t lag behind on eighths.”

To the basses: “When you come in, I want you to come in more gently, not as if you were stabbing a knife into the butter. Never think softer than the sopranos. You’re the foundation!”

Vladimir increases the tempo toward the end and instructs the choir in how to sing the final two measures, which slow and soften dramatically: “Elide *y* of *luy* with *nas*” (*pomiluy nas*). To the basses: “Sing *nas* like you sang *mi-*.”

The last note resonates.

Next the choir rehearses No. 4 (“Gladsome light”). It is an ancient hymn, featuring a tenor solo and modulations by the choir.

Vladimir ask the choir: “Do you understand this?”

Answer: “Not really.”

He explains: In early Christianity, when this part was sung, the church was lit only by candles. The prayer started like inner thinking, meditation. In the twentieth century, there are few candles (you can turn on the lights). So it changes from the original meaning of lighting candles. It says that the teaching of Christ brought light. It should be very meditative.

They try. “It’s not bad. But we still need to work.”

Except for the tenor solo, the voices are soft, and the basses are quite low. A few measures after the tenor solo, the sopranos have an entrance molto cantabile: “This is the only time I’m not asking sopranos to sing softer than everyone else.” He demonstrates. “Sing without restraint.” But at the same time, “Tempo, tempo!”

To the sopranos: “Adopt the attitudes of the basses and altos when they’re doing their solos. Joyful, not forte. This isn’t joy, it sounds like you’re begging. I need joy.”

“Consonants! Not so loudly.”

“Good!”

They rehearse No. 5: “There were inaccuracies in altos and tenors. Sopranos: Don’t beg alms. Sing as though you’re singing a lullaby.”

“Don’t rush.”

On the last phrase, *i slavu Irudey Tvoih Izrailia* (“and the glory of Thy people Israel”): “Think eighths. You’re doing the second quarter note sooner than I want.”

They finish. “You’ll do it at the concert. Unfortunately, you forget that what the choir is doing in measure one is the same as in measure twenty-eight. Sopranos: It should be rapturous.”

No. 14: “The meaning is very intimate here. I want you to sing on em [hum] and watch my hand carefully.”

“Not bad at all. If you can do this with the words, following my hand, it will be just right!” Laughter.

They do it though. Vladimir: “Bravo.” (He claps with his pencil.)

Gil: “Could we do No. 11? The words in the refrain are so tricky.”

Vladimir: “Okay. Just a run-through.”

No. 11 (“My soul magnifies the Lord”): “Pay attention that here in this movement I’m changing my conducting.”

“There is a trick here, legato with articulation.”

5.

Thursday, February 23. Dress rehearsal at Saint Philip Neri Church, the concert site. Vladimir wears his argyle vest, black shirt, black pants, brown shoes. He is impatient

with the choir when they miss entrances or forget what he has told them about singing legato or not. The soprano section is upset that singers who have joined them from another choir are out of tune.

The choir does a "sharping" exercise before the rehearsal starts. The singers at the ends of the rows sing a half-step above those in the middle. By the second time through, everyone is on the same pitch.

This is Vladimir's first rehearsal of No. 10 ("Having beheld the resurrection of Christ"). "The first time, I want you to just remember what we've done and sing quietly."

"Do you understand what you're singing? I want you to sing it as a Russian Old Believer would have years ago. You're singing it too modern, too emotional."

The men's voices open the piece. He tells them to be decisive. "Don't rush. Meter, meter! Not legato."

The women enter pianissimo: "The sound should be forward, inside, inside! Inside! I want you to sing it on a higher level."

After the calm beginning section, the tempo picks up and all parts are high in the register and fortissimo: "Explosion! Ecstasy. Think about this as a pagan address to God." The mood changes abruptly. The women hold their notes pianissimo, and the men come in with a chant, *Priidite fsi vernii* ("Come, all you faithful"). Vladimir tells them: "Feel fear, that you were so daring as to address God the way you just did, as if you'd yelled at the boss."

"Now from the beginning. Really do it!"

They go through No. 11: "Molto legato. Rachmaninoff wrote this for a children's choir. No one should sing louder than the altos."

Vladimir demonstrates his conducting pattern. He takes off his sweater. He reminds the choir to make "all articulation very precise" and to "listen to the basses!"

No. 12: "Now, you'll do everything by yourselves. I've been helping you. Don't wait for me."

"I'm glad that you remember some things this well."

"In this movement, the transition—the quality is important."

No. 9: "I want everybody to have the impression that you're singing behind that wall."

"I can't hear the precise rhythm and the precise sound." Vladimir steps away and doesn't conduct, except to tap his foot, snap his fingers.

"You're doing everything correctly here. Not emotion enough, though. It needs to be very intense, measure fifty-four fortissimo toward the end. Like a spring. Think of a spring inside."

To the sopranos: "Pianissimo, but think about the spring, very intense."

"*Sviat, Sviat, Sviat*: Don't jerk on the attack."

"It was a lot better—can you hear it yourselves?" Choir: "*Da*."

No. 2: Vladimir stops second tenors, makes a T with his hands for pitch.

No. 1: Opening note. Vladimir has them do it twice. “Very precise. I’ll just be helping you. *Espressivo*!”

He stops them: “Piano with awe. If there’s piano without awe . . . Need to keep intensity. Otherwise, when you come to the second phrase, all the steam goes to a whistle.”

Vladimir works on the alto solo, beginning and end. Sopranos lag. “Tempo, tempo!” He directs sopranos by “playing” violin.

No. 3: “When I hear this, I feel so sorry for you!” They try again.

“This is what I want you to do in the concert!” Laughter.

They practice the beginnings and endings of Nos. 4 and 5, giving and getting pitch.

On No. 6, one of the most popular parts of the *Vespers*, Vladimir says, “The sound must be sparkling.” He holds his head back, looks at the choir under his eyebrows. Lowers his head, shakes it no.

“Performing this part, you need to forget yourself. You need to free yourselves of everything earthly and sing as though you were in paradise.” They sing two notes. He stops them. “You are just at the gate of heaven. Look at my hands!” He holds his hands up. “My hands are talking to you, in a totally different way. Can you answer me in the same way?”

They try. No. He has them hum. “Can you hear that? Now with the words, exactly the same way.”

“We’ll have a long pause after No. 6.” He has them sing the last two measures of No. 7. “I want you to react faster to my hands. I started to show you diminuendo and it took you a half hour.” No. 7 is famous for its onomatopoeic sound of bells.

The pitch transition from No. 8 to No. 9 is difficult. Vladimir says he’ll make a longer pause. They sing the last chord of No. 8. Vladimir turns the page very slowly. Laughter. Vladimir: “Long pause!”

“My dear tenors, piano, pianissimo.” They go to the last measure. Vladimir stands rigid, slightly back on his heels, left hand and arm straight against his side, palm open on the front of one thigh.

No. 10: Last measure, *smertiyu smert razrushi* (“He has destroyed death by death”), one of the most beautiful parts of the *Vespers*. The singers do not understand that *smert* means “death.”

To the sopranos: “Can you hear the altos? This is why you’re like narcissists. There are altos, too.” They sing. “That was totally different this time. Thank you.”

Vladimir: “Saturday we’ll sing only Nos. 13 and 15. Sunday, Nos. 14 and 15. Monday we’ll do whichever was worst!” Laughter.

“We’ll finish. Thank you very much. I hope that on Saturday, your day off, you’ll look at the score. Look at it as your bible.”

* * *

The three 1995 concerts (Saturday evening, Sunday afternoon, and Monday evening) were sold out. In addition to a complete performance of the *Vespers*, audiences heard the Oregon Repertory Singers children's choir sing two pieces, in Russian, with Vladimir conducting. "Vladimir was so good with them," I wrote in my diary.

At the invitation of one of the board members, I handed Vladimir flowers during his second curtain call after the Monday concert, and he kissed me three times on the cheek. All the former choir administrators attended that night. I was dismayed to hear that Vladimir was ill and planned to see several doctors before leaving Portland, but I learned no details.

Whatever was wrong with Vladimir, he recovered and came back to Portland in March 1997 to again present the *Vespers*, bringing with him four soloists from the Moscow Chamber Choir. He returned in April 2001. Those concerts included excerpts from the *Vespers* along with other Russian works, one of which, Sviridov's *Ikon*, featured a stunning solo by the bass Vladimir had brought with him.

Vladimir told the *Oregonian* that his appearance with Oregon Repertory Singers nearly had to be canceled that year because he had problems securing a visa. He said he understood that relations between the United States and Russia had deteriorated, but that he had already visited the United States seven or eight times. "For over thirty years I've been traveling all over the world," he said. "I'm not involved in any political organizations or Mafia activities." Vladimir was scheduled to appear once more with Oregon Repertory Singers in October 2007. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow denied his visa application, however, with no explanation.

Vladimir is still not well known outside choral music circles in the West (he has no Wikipedia entry in English), but recordings by the Moscow Chamber Choir are widely available. The choir continues to tour extensively. In December 2013, for example, the Minin choir gave a series of concerts in Siberia and the Urals in honor of Vladimir's eighty-fifth birthday.

Vladimir told his radio interviewer that he particularly enjoys touring the Russian provinces: "The public is different. The vision and perception of life also vastly different. These people soak up music with their souls. These people are as if from another world. And the atmosphere in the hall is so different. There is a tremendous spiritual thirst there. These people are thirsting for something lofty, and specifically Russian."