Rachmaninoff The Bells &
Symphonic Dances
Karina Canellakis
NETHERLANDS RADIO PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA & CHOIR

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Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

	The Bells, Op. 35	
1	I. Allegro, ma non tanto	6. 47
2	II. Lento	10. 38
3	III. Presto	8. 51
4	IV. Lento lugubre	11. 21
	Symphonic Dances, Op. 45	
5	I. Non Allegro	11. 58
6	II. Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)	10. 03
7	III. Lento assai – Allegro Vivace	14. 22
	Total playing time:	74. 04

Kristina Mkhitaryan, soprano (Track 2)
Dmytro Popov, tenor (Track 1)
Alexander Vinogradov, bass (Track 4)

Netherlands Radio Choir (Tracks 1–4) · **Benjamin Goodson**, choirmaster

Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra
Karina Canellakis, conductor

It was exciting to feel the unwavering, high energy exhibited by the orchestra and choir while performing these well-loved masterpieces. Rachmaninoff's music tends to call for this constant striving to elicit a burning level of intensity and outpouring of the heart, while simultaneously requiring delicate care to respect every detail of the score, execute the technically demanding elements with refinement and precision, and play the soaring melodies with finesse and warmth. The choir gave their utmost in The Bells to provide a clear and captivating rendition of the text, sustain a beautiful golden color, and infuse the phrases with wildly different characters - haunting, terrifying, suspenseful, yearning, catatrophic, ghostly, and shimmering.

The first movement of the Bells peeks out as though a child is discovering a toy-piano, then winds up like a music box and rushes forward with youthful exuberance and lightness, elevated by the joyful tone of Dmytro Popov's voice. The choir gives fantastic bursts of energy and propels us forward into this charming, enchanted movement which culminates with an over the top, life-affirming climax before winding back down to close with the same little toy bells and soft string chord.

Beginning the second movement, the violas coax us into a grey-sketched, chiaroscuro world - pierced by brass bells which toll back and forth like a giant, ominous pendulum. Nostalgia and lush romance then seduce us, and the choir gives a golden sheen as they appear from the distance. Kristina Mkhitaryan's supple voice soothes and mesmerizes.

The third movement overwhelms in every sense, a raging storm pierced by bells of war and cries of suffering. The choir struggles beneath the might of massive, thrilling orchestral waves.

In the fourth movement, we can see only shrouded images as the english horn

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takes us into the memory of a life lived, punctuated by jarring bell strikes in the piano and winds. Alexander Vinogradov's jaw-droppingly powerful voice carries us through fear of death, with haunting echoes of the choir in the background, until we finally surrender, to the „grave-like peace", his final words, reflected in the beautiful D-flat major melody which washes over us and brings the work to a heavenly conclusion.

Like the Bells, the opening movement of Symphonic Dances is timid at first, before launching into an earthy, rooted, rhythmically grounded dance, catapulting itself into a world of constant motion and excitement. The shy and suave beginning of the saxophone solo lures the listener into Rachmaninoff's inner world of nostalgia, and the lush, golden sound of the strings, with soft piano rolls in the background, envelops the listener with a sense of warmth, perhaps regret, and longing.

The second movement is a dizzying night-waltz, as though a darkly cloaked figure summons the listener to dance uncontrollably, increasingly intoxicated and swirling wildly, before mysteriously disappearing into the night without a trace.

The third movement announces itself boldly, jumping into a wildly energetic and spirited dance which continues playfully until we come to the impassioned and yearning middle section. The final riveting bars sweep us into the air, until we are finally released from the fervor and enjoy the glow of the final (long!) tam-tam ring.

Karina Canellakis

In the spring of 1913, Serge Rachmaninoff turned forty. He had come a long way since the disastrous première of his First Symphony in St Petersburg in March 1897 (the critics hated it, and the conductor – Alexander Glazunov – was very possibly drunk). He emerged from the emotional and creative crisis that ensued thanks to the assistance of a sympathetic doctor, Nikolay Dahl. A whole series of masterpieces followed – another symphony, three piano concertos, a cello sonata, and a flurry of songs and solo piano works – establishing him as Imperial Russia's leading composer, not to mention a brilliant pianist and equally gifted conductor. He was also content in his domestic life. He had been married to his first cousin, Natalya, for a decade, and their two young daughters – Irina and Tatyana – brought him great joy, especially on the family's country estate, Ivanovka, near Tambov.

Yet Rachmaninoff was always prone to introspection, melancholy, and a strong dose of fatalism. In 1912, an anonymous female fan sent him a copy of Edgar Allan Poe's ***The Bells***, very liberally translated by one of the leading representatives of the Russian Symbolist movement, Konstantin Balmont. Rachmaninoff was immediately struck by the brooding tone of the poem, which traces the journey from youth to death. Scored for three soloists, chorus, and a vast orchestra, his "Choral Symphony" evokes the sounds and colours signalled in each of Poe's four verses. The opening *allegro* portrays the silvery bells of a winter sleigh ride. This is followed by a gentle slow movement, marked *lento*, celebrating the golden bells of a wedding. The *presto* third movement unleashes the brassiness of "loud alarum bells" with music that is as dissonant as anything Rachmaninoff would ever write. In the doleful finale, death and mortality are represented by the tolling of iron bells. Throughout, Rachmaninoff cites the

Dies irae theme from the Latin requiem mass, although in the symphony's final bars, a miraculous sense of luminous transcendence prevails.

"The sound of church bells dominated all the cities of the Russia I used to know," Rachmaninoff later recalled. "All my life I have taken pleasure in the differing moods and music of gladly chiming and mournfully tolling bells... If I have been at all successful in making bells vibrate with human emotion in my works, it largely due to the fact that most of my life was lived amid the vibrations of the bells of Moscow." Yet for all its Russian connections, *The Bells* was actually composed in Italy. In December 1912, after a busy concert season, Rachmaninoff took a short holiday in Switzerland, before heading to Rome, where he rented an apartment near the Spanish Steps that had once been occupied by Pyotr Tchaikovsky. Ideas came quickly: "All day long I spent at the piano or the writing table, and not until the sinking sun gilded the pines on the Monte Pincio did I put away my pen." Inspired first by Poe, then by Rome, *The Bells* expresses Rachmaninoff's personal and artistic debt to Tchaikovsky. Serendipitously, the narrative arc of Poe's poem mapped directly into the structure of the *Symphonie Pathétique*, as Rachmaninoff observed: "The idea of a lugubrious and slow finale... held nothing strange." Tchaikovsky had hailed Rachmaninoff's talent in the early 1890s and effectively anointed him as his musical heir. Now, twenty years after Tchaikovsky's untimely death in 1893, Rachmaninoff was able to write what was, in effect, a requiem for his mentor.

Rachmaninoff dedicated *The Bells* to Wilhelm Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra, whose playing he very much admired. It was premiered, though, in St Petersburg and Moscow in November 1913 and February 1914.

Netherlands Radio Choir & Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra

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The outbreak of war delayed publication until 1920, by which time, Rachmaninoff – like so many other Russians – had fled Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. In order to support himself, his family, his friends, and many other penniless émigrés, he embarked on a career as a virtuoso pianist, undertaking long and relentless tours across Europe and North America. His busy schedule brought considerable material wealth and comfort (including an austerely beautiful Bauhaus villa on the banks of Lake Lucerne), but it left little time for composition. In an interview given in 1934, he reflected on his absent muse: "In losing my country, I lost myself also. To the exile whose musical roots, traditions and background have been annihilated, there remains no desire for self-expression; no solace apart from the unbroken and unbreakable silence of his memories."

Rachmaninoff's compositional output did indeed dry up in the decade after he left Russia, and between 1926 and 1943, he completed just six numbered works, of which the ***Symphonic Dances*** is the very last. Yet each of these is a masterpiece in its own way. Moreover, Rachmaninoff was not merely content to repeat the musical gestures of the past, but proved himself responsive to new ideas and influences. In both Europe and America, he encountered the music of Stravinsky and Schoenberg, of Gershwin and Ravel, and above all, jazz (the opening movement includes a ravishing solo for alto saxophone). Even as he presented himself as a romantic and a nostalgic in a whole series of press interviews, his musical voice became leaner, more streamlined,more self-consciously contemporary, if not exactly modernist.

The *Symphonic Dances* were composed on Long Island, New York, in the summer and early autumn of 1940. Rachmaninoff had originally thought of calling them *Fantastic Dances*, and there is certainly something ominous about their atmosphere. Just as Ravel had conjured up the destruction of the First World War in *La valse*, Rachmaninoff turned to dance in order to convey the horrors that had been unleased on the world in 1939. Yet he also considered naming the individual movements "Morning", "Noon", and "Night", perhaps suggesting Oedipus's solution to the riddle of the Sphinx ("What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night?" – "Man: as an infant, he crawls on all fours; as an adult, he walks on two legs and; in old age, he uses a walking stick"). There is, though, no sense of creative fatigue about the *Symphonic Dances*. Instead, they represent a final, triumphant statement of Rachmaninoff's artistic credo, and to underline this, he included quotations from two pre-revolutionary works – the unpublished and (then) unknown First Symphony, and the *All-Night Vigil* from 1915 – as well as, of course, the *Dies irae*.

The movement that Rachmaninoff cites from the *Vigil* tells the biblical story of the resurrection of Christ, and this moment in the manuscript of the *Symphonic Dances* is marked "Alleluia." Then, at the very end of the score, Rachmaninoff wrote "I thank thee, Lord." Has the grim fatalism associated with the *Dies irae* theme been vanquished by faith? Rachmaninoff was notoriously reticent about his spiritual convictions, but what is certainly true about the *Symphonic Dances* is that they represent a final vindication of a life devoted to art – as well as a conviction that music should speak directly to the listener. They were premiered by the Philadelphia Orchestra in January 1941, conducted by Eugene Ormandy. Just over two years later (and a few days short of his seventieth birthday), Rachmaninoff died – a naturalised American citizen – in Beverley Hills. He was buried in Kensico Cemetery, Valhalla, near New York, where he still rests.

Philip Ross Bullock

The Bells - Lyrics

Text: Konstantin Balmont (1867–1942) after Edgar Allen Poe (1809–1849)
English translation (sung): Fanny S. Copeland (1872–1970)

1. Slyshish', sani mchatsja v rjad

Slyshish', sani mchatsja v rjad,
Mchatsja v rjad.
Kolokol'chiki zvenjat,
Serebristym ljogkim zvonom slukh nash sladostno tomjat,
Etim pen'em i guden'em o zabven'i govorjat.

O, kak zvonko, zvonko, zvonko,
Tochno zvuchnyj smekh rebjonka,
V jasnom vozdukhe nochnom
Govorjat oni o tom,
Chto za dnjami zabluzhden'ja
Nastupajet vozrozhden'e,
Chto volshebno naslazhden'e,
Naslazhden'e nezhnym snom.
Sani mchatsja, mchatsja v rjad,
Kolokol'chiki zvenjat,

Hear the sledges with the bells

Listen, hear the silver bells!
Silver bells!
Hear the sledges with the bells,
How they charm our weary senses with a sweetness that compels,
In the ringing and the singing that of deep oblivion tells.

Hear them calling, calling, calling
Rippling sounds of laughter, falling
On the icy midnight air;
And a promise they declare,
That beyond Illusion's cumber,
Births and lives beyond all number,
Waits an universal slumber – deep and sweet past all compare.
Hear the sledges with the bells
Hear the silver-throated bells;

Zvjozdy slushajut, kak sani, ubegaja, govorjat,
I, vnimaja im, gorjat,
I mechtaja, i blistaja, v nebe dukhami parjat,
I izmenchivym sijan'em,
Molchalivym obajan'em,
Vmeste s zvonom, vmeste s pen'em
O zabven'e govorjat.

2. Slyshish' k svad'be zov svjatoj

Slyshish' k svad'be zov svjatoj,
Zolotoj?
Skol'ko nezhnogo blazhenstva v etoj pesne molodoj.
Skvoz' spokojnyj vozdukh nochi
Slovno smotrjat ch'i-to ochi
I blestjat,
Iz volny pevuchikh zvukov na lunu oni gljadjat,
Iz prizyvnykh divnykh kelij,
Polny skazochnykh veselij,
Narostaya, upadaya, bryzgi svetlye letjat.
Vnov' potukhnut, vnov' blestjat,

See, the stars bow down to hearken, what their melody foretells,
With a passion that compels,
And their dreaming is a gleaming that a perfumed air exhales,
And their thoughts are but a shining
And a luminous divining
Of the singing and the ringing, that a dreamless peace foretells.

Hear the mellow wedding bells

Hear the mellow wedding-bells,
Golden bells!
What a world of tender passion their melodious voice foretells!
Through the night their sound entrances,
Like a lover's yearning glances,
That arise
On a wave of tuneful rapture to the moon within the skies.
From the sounding cells upwinging
Flash the tones of joyous singing
Rising, falling, brightly calling; from a thousand happy throats

I ronjajut svetlyj vzgljad
Na grjadushcheje, gde dremlet
Bezmjatezhnost' nezhnykh snov,
Vozveshchajemykh soglas'em zolotykh
kolokolov.

Roll the glowing, golden note,
And an amber twilight gloats
While the tender vow is whispered that great
happiness foretells,
To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells,
the golden bells!

3. Slyshish', vojushchij nabat

Slyshish', vojushchij nabat,
Tochno stonet mednyj ad.
Eti zvuki, v dikoj muke, skazku uzhasov tverdjat.
Tochno moljat im pomoch',
Krik kidajut prjamo v noch',
Prjamo v ushi tjomnoj nochi
Kazhdij zvuk,

To dlinneje, to koroche,
Vyklikajet svoj ispug,
I ispug ikh tak velik,
Tak bezumen kazhdyj krik,
Chto razorvannye zvony, nesposobnyje
zvuchat',
Mogut tol'ko bit'sja, vit'sja i krichat', krichat',
krichat'!

Hear the loud alarum bells

Hear them, hear the brazen bells,
Hear the loud alarum bells!
In their sobbing, in their throbbing,
what a tale of horror dwells!
How beseeching sounds their cry
'Neath the naked midnight sky,
Through the darkness wildly pleading
In affright,
Now approaching, now receding
Rings their message through the night.
And so fierce is their dismay
And the terror they portray,
That the brazen domes are riven and their
tongues can only speak
In a tuneless, jangling, wrangling, as they shriek,
and shriek, and shriek,

Tol'ko plakat' o poshchade
I k pylajushchej gromade
Vopli skorbi obrashchat'!
A mezh tem ogon' bezumnyj,
I glukhoj i mnogoshumnyj,
Vsjo gorit,
To iz okon, to po kryshe,
Mchitsja vyshe, vyshe, vyshe,
I kak budto govorit:
Ja khochu
Vyshe mchat'sja, razgorat'sja, vstrechu
lunnomu luchu,
Il' umru, il' totchas, totchas vplot'
do mesyatsa vzlechu.
O, nabat, nabat, nabat,
Jesli b ty vernul nazad
Etot uzhas, eto plamja, etu iskru, etot
vzgljad,
Etot pervyj vzgljad ognja,
O kotorom ty veshchajesh', s plachem,
s voplem i zvenja.
A teper' nam net spasen'ja,
Vsjudu plamja i kipen'e,
Vsjudu strakh i vozmushchen'e!
Tvoj prizyv,

Till their frantic supplication
To the ruthless conflagration
Grows discordant, faint and weak.
But the fire sweeps on unheeding,
And in vain is all their pleading
With the flame!
From each window, roof and spire,
Leaping higher, higher, higher,
Every lambent tongue proclaims:
I shall soon,
Leaping higher, still aspire,
till I reach the crescent moon;
Else I die of my desire in aspiring
to the moon!
O despair, despair, despair,
That so feebly ye compare
With the blazing, raging horror, and the panic,
and the glare,
That ye cannot turn the flames,
As your unavailing clang and clamour
mournfully proclaims.
And in hopeless resignation
Man must yield his habitation
To the warring desolation!
Yet we know

Dikikh zvukov nesoglasnost'
Vozveshchajet nam opasnost',
To rastjot beda glukhaja, to spadajet, kak priliv,
Slukh nash chutko lovit volny v peremene zvukovoj,
Vnov' spadajet, vnov' rydajet medno stonushchij priboj.

By the booming and the clanging,
By the roaring and the twanging,
How the danger falls and rises like the tides that ebb and flow,
And the progress of the danger every ear distinctly tells
By the sinking and the swelling in the clamour of the bells.

4. Pokhoronnyj slyshen zvon

Pokhoronnyj slyshen zvon,
Dolgij zvon.
Gor'koj skorbi slyshny zvuki, gor'koj zhizni konchen son,
Zvuk zheleznyj vozveshchajet o pechali pokhoron.
I nevol'no my drozhim,
Ot zabav svoikh speshim
I rydajem, vspominajem, chto i my glaza smezhim.
Neizmenno monotonnyj,
Etot vozglas otdalennyj,
Pokhoronnyj tjazhkij zvon,
Tochno ston,

Hear the tolling of the bells

Hear the tolling of the bells,
Mournful bells!
Bitter end to fruitless dreaming their stern monody foretells!
What a world of desolation in their own utterance dwells!
And we tremble at our doom,
As we think upon the tomb,
Glad endeavour quenched for ever in the silence and the gloom.
With persistent iteration
They repeat their lamentation,
Till each muffled monotone
Seems a groan,

Skorbnyj, gnevnyj,
I plachevnyj,
Vyrastajet v dolgij gul,
Vozveshchajet, chto stradalets
Neprobudnym snom usnul.
V kolokol'nykh kel'jakh rzhavykh,
On dlja pravykh i nepravykh
Grozno vtorit ob odnom:
Chto na serdce budet kamen', chto glaza somknutsja snom.
Fakel traurnyj gorit,
S kolokol'ni kto-to kriknul, kto-to gromko govorit.
Kto-to chjornyj tam stoit,
I khokhochet, i gremit,
I gudit, gudit, gudit,
K kolokol'ne pripadajet,
Gulkij kolokol kachayet,
Gulkij kolokol rydajet,
Stonet v vozdukhe nemom,
I protjazhno vozveshchajet o pokoje grobovom.

Heavy, moaning.
Their intoning,
Waxing sorrowful and deep,
Bear the message,
that a brother passed away to endless sleep.
Those relentless voices rolling
Seem to take a joy in tolling
For the sinner and the just
That their eyes be sealed in a slumber,
and their hearts be turned to dust
Where they lie beneath a stone.
But the spirit of the belfry is a sombre fiend that dwells
In the shadow of the bells,
And he gibbers and he yells,
As he knells, and knells, and knells,
Madly round the belfry reeling,
While the giant bells are pealing,
While the bells are fiercely thrilling,
Moaning forth the word of doom,
While those iron bells, unfeeling,
Through the void repeat the doom:
There is neither rest nor respite,
saw the quiet of the tomb!

Dmytro Popov, Alexander Vinogradov, Kristina Mkhitaryan, Karina Canellakis & Everett Porter

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Acknowledgements

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