MCD 10020

RACHMANINOFF

THE SAINT LOUIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA & CHORUS
LEONARD SLATKIN, Conductor

Arnold Voketaitis, Bass-Baritone
Marianna Christos, Soprano • Walter Planté, Tenor

THE BELLS, OP. 35
The Silver Sleigh Bells (6:13)
The Mellow Wedding Bells (9:22)
The Loud Alarm Bells (8:30)
The Mournful Iron Bells (10:36)

THE ISLE OF THE DEAD, OP. 29 (20:19)

Digitally mastered from an original analog recording.

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"The Bells" recorded October 1980 • "The Isle of the Dead" recorded in 1979
Produced by Marc Aubort & Joanna Nickrenz • Engineering: ELITE RECORDINGS, INC., N.Y.C.

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Following the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, Rachmaninoff went into a depression that tied up his creative activity for nearly three years. It was four months of daily "autosuggestion" therapy with Dr. Nikolai Dahl, early in 1900, that brought him out of it, as confirmed by the composition of the hugely successful Second Piano Concerto (dedicated to Dr. Dahl) before that year was out. This began a particularly productive period, a decade-and-a-half which saw the creation of the two sonatas for piano, the two sets of *Etudes-Tableaux*, the Chopin Variations, and the Second Suite for two pianos as well as other works. One of the last works of this happy period was this choral symphony, composed early in 1913, during Rachmaninoff's sojourn in Rome, and first performed in Moscow on February 8 of the following year.

Rachmaninoff and his family had as their residence in Rome a comfortable and quiet apartment that had once been home to Modest Tchaikovsky, the brother of the composer. Whether or not Rachmaninoff was especially conscious of that setting as one in which Piotr Ilyich had been present as a frequent visitor, it proved to be an ideal workshop, as he recalled later:

> Nothing helps me as much as solitude. In my opinion it is possible to compose only when one is alone and there are not external circumstances to hinder the calm flow of ideas. These conditions were ideally realized in my flat on the Piazza di Spagna. All day long I spent at the piano or the writing table, and not until the sinking sun gilded the pines of the Monte Pincio did I put away my pen.

In common with Tchaikovsky before him and Aaron Copland after him, Rachmaninoff composed one symphony which he did not include among those to which he affixed numbers. When he completed *The Bells* he designated the work as a symphony, and in fact referred to it for some twenty years as his "Third." The number was never officially attached, however, and was assigned instead to the orchestral symphony he composed in 1935-36, but it would be a mistake to categorize *The Bells* as a cantata, for it is really symphonic in its concept and its structure: "choral symphony" is the description that suits it best.

This structure was, of course, determined by that of Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem itself, which was just the sort of literature that held the strongest appeal for Rachmaninoff, whose fascination with bell sounds had been shown in the final movement ("Russian Easter") of his early First Suite

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on May 1, 1909, in Moscow, Rachmaninoff conducting.

The painting that inspired this symbolic poem was seen by Rachmaninoff on a visit to Leipzig, the proximity of which city had been one of his reasons for settling in Dresden. The painter Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), was a Swiss whose Romantic, melancholy style and sumptuously dark coloration struck an especially sympathetic chord in Rachmaninoff—who was, however, neither the only composer nor the first to respond to Böcklin's paintings with music. Max Reger composed a "Böcklin Suite" of four shorter tone poems, one of which reflects the same painting that caught Rachmaninoff's fancy. *Die Toteninsel* ("The Isle of the Dead") shows an island which is almost entirely cliff, rising awesomely from the water into a sunless sky; a portal has been carved through which the boat bearing a coffin may enter, and in the center, beyond the entrance, cypresses rise taller than the rocky sepulchre. The small boat making its way toward that grim portal bears a white coffin across its bow, draped with wreaths; a solitary figure, shrouded in white, stands over it, and a single oarsman rows in the stern.

Like the painting itself, the music inspired by it seeks to evoke a mood more than to tell a story, though details of the visual image are reflected in the music. The opening suggests the water quietly lapping against the shoreless cliffside. At length the horn breathes a lamentation; the undulating figure of the opening becomes more animated and the lamentation is taken up more poignantly by the oboe. The opening figure asserts itself still more energetically, and the lamentation takes the form of a brass chorale, its shape recognized more clearly now as what was only hinted earlier: it is a variant of the *Dies irae*, the ancient chant for the dead.

The middle section corresponds to one of Rachmaninoff's great slow movements, reaching an emotional peak in a soaring, lyrical transformation of the lament theme in the strings. This rapturous effect is dispelled by a menacing orchestral irruption which leads to the concluding section, in which the insistent tread of the *Dies irae* prevails in one form or another as other materials are heard again. Finally the melodic fragments dissolve, even the murmuring of the water is stilled, the sky changes from sunless to dark; lamentation has ended, memory has vanished, and only stillness remains.

from notes by Richard Freed

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for two pianos (Op. 5), and whose personality had certain characteristics in common with that of Poe. While the fatalism of the work (the *Dies irae*, virtually Rachmaninoff's "trade mark," makes a thinly disguised appearance even in the section on the "golden wedding bells") links it in a sense with *The Isle of the Dead*, the four tableaux have a symbolic substance not unrelated to that of the three periods of the day represented in the much later *Symphonic Dances*.

Strictly speaking, it was not Poe's poem that stimulated the composition of *The Bells*, but a translation by the Russian poet Konstantin Balmont, which is so free that it might be more aptly described as a work *based on* Poe. Balmont's version does not make use of the repetitive device that is the most conspicuous element in Poe's original, but instead exhibits a more dynamic and dramatic character: there are lines which simply have no direct counterparts in what Poe wrote. Instead of allowing the tolling bells the center of the stage, Balmont focused on the urgency of the respective human situations. For these reasons, it would be futile to attempt to sing this work using Poe's English words (Balmont was no more concerned about preserving Poe's meter than he was about producing a literal translation), and similarly pointless to offer the original poem as a guide for anglophone listeners to a performance in Russian. The English text used in this recording is a translation of Balmont's poem made for this purpose more than fifty years ago by Fanny S. Copeland.

The score, dedicated to Willem Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam and revised in 1936, calls for solo soprano, tenor and baritone, with a mixed chorus and a very large orchestra (triple woodwind, six horns, etc.). The three soloists do not perform together at any point; each is heard with the chorus in a single movement only. In the first movement *(Allegro non troppo)*, whose silver sleigh-bells herald life's beginning, the role assigned the tenor rings with optimism. In the succeeding slow movement *(Lento)* the soprano sings of the golden wedding bells; the mood is one of restraint, of tranquility rather than excitement. The demonic *Presto* which serves as the symphony's scherzo is for the chorus and orchestra without soloist. The baritone is called upon in the final movement *(Lento lugubre)*, whose mournful iron bells seem so appropriately Russian, and whose message is so aptly enhanced with a citation of the *Dies irae*.

While Rachmaninoff eventually stopped referring to *The Bells* as his "Third Symphony," he never stopped regarding it as the finest of all his works. He was enormously pleased with it when he finished

the score, and gratified by the enthusiasm of the premiere audience, which presented him with laurel wreaths as well as bouquets. He had few opportunities to hear the work in the twenty-nine years that remained to him after that event, but *The Bells* remained his favorite.

I. THE SILVER SLEIGH-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;
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.

II. THE MELLOW WEDDING BELLS

Hear the mellow wedding-bells,
Golden bells!
What a world of tender passion their melodious 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 bells upwinging
Flash the tones of joyous singing
Rising, falling, brightly calling; from a thousand happy throats
Roll the glowing, golden notes,
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!

III. 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,
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 flames!
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
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.

IV. THE MOURNFUL IRON 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 endeavor quenched forever in the silence and the gloom.
With persistent iteration
They repeat their lamentation,
Till each muffled monotone
Seems a groan
Heavy, moaning.
Their intoning,
Waxing sorrowful and deep,
Bears 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, save the quiet of the tomb!

Rachmaninoff, in common with many other composers who had successful careers as performers, had to steal time from his performing commitments in order to pursue his creative activity through much of his life. In his early thirties he enjoyed two conspicuously successful seasons as conductor at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, following which, in 1906, he decided to give himself more time for composing by removing himself from the scene for a long period. He had enjoyed a visit to Dresden once, and it was there he took his wife and infant daughter; they remained there for about three years, returning to Russia only for the summers, and it was during the early part of this period that Rachmaninoff composed two of his most successful works for orchestra—the Second Symphony and the tone poem *The Isle of the Dead*. The latter work was composed in 1907 and first performed