

'The Bells' Symphony Wins Ovation for Rachmaninoff

Sergei Rachmaninoff was the star of the Philadelphia Orchestra's third concert at Constitution Hall last night. "The Bells" symphony, played while the composer-pianist sat statue-like in a box, is deeply laden with the somber Rachmaninoff temperament. There were ominous undercurrents even in the bright first movement ("silver bells") and the romantic second ("mellow wedding bells"), and naturally the fearful quality mounted in the third "loud alarm bells" movement and the last ("mournful iron bells").

The scoring of this symphony is on a rather grand scale, with full chorus and three vocal soloists as well as the orchestra with its bell and celeste accessories. But the music itself is not imposing—it is largely on a pictorial level.

One of the most pleasing things about the work, revealed in this first performance in Washington, was how few of the bell-like effects were produced by actual bells. Clever writing for various instruments suggest the various timbres of the four kinds of bells and there is little straining for imitative effect, even less than in the Poe verses. What Rachmaninoff has attempted to do, for the most part successfully, is to transfer to music the moods that the bells in the poem suggest. This mood-painting in music is a venerable art and one in which Rachmaninoff, as composer and pianist, excels.

The University of Pennsylvania Choral Society, directed by Harl MacDonald, sang the choral sections with

seriousness and sharp attention to cues, but it lacked compactness of tone and was sometimes lost in the full volume of the orchestra. Solo parts were given to the soprano (Agnes Davis) in the golden wedding bells stanzas; to the tenor (Fritz Krueger) for the sleigh-bells, and to the baritone (Elwood Hawkins) for the mournful bells—all good singing parts that were delivered in fitting spirit tho none of the singers displayed unusual vocal gift.

There was a sort of festival quality about this symphony which apparently made a strong appeal to an almost-capacity house. The applause that greeted Rachmaninoff when he appeared after intermission to play his second concerto with the orchestra, and the long ovation he received afterward, was as much a carry-over of enthusiasm for the symphony as it was a tribute to his better known concerto. Rachmaninoff, who has just recovered from an influenza attack, was not in top form, but he naturally gave his own concerto the ultimate degree of poetic realization.

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