

## RACHMANINOFF WORK INTERPRETS POE POEM

### Striking Similarity of Thought Shown Between Poet and Com- poser—A Real Symphony

Not since the performance of the Mahler Eighth Symphony has the Philadelphia Orchestra given the American premiere of a choral work of the importance of the Rachmaninoff symphony, "The Bells," for chorus and orchestra, which will be presented for the first time in public this afternoon. To judge from hearing a single rehearsal, always a dangerous basis upon which to pass an opinion as to a new work, the Rachmaninoff composition is fully as important a work as the Mahler. Where Mahler depended to a very large extent upon the gigantic forces used in the presentation of his composition, Rachmaninoff rests his upon a more solid musical foundation.

The poem which Mr. Rachmaninoff has chosen for the choral part of the work is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells." The symphony was composed in Rome, having been begun seven years ago last month, and was finished in Russia and orchestrated in the summer of the same year. The whole of the original poem is used in the chorus of the symphony. It was originally set to a translation into Russian, which Mr. Rachmaninoff says is a "more or less free version," which may readily be imagined when the characteristic English idioms of the original are considered.

#### The "Retranslation"

Naturally when the poem was set in another language the version in English which is sung by the chorus contains some changes from the original, necessitated doubtless by the accents and the length of the notes of the music at certain places. The work is divided into four parts, the first treating of the silver sleigh bells, the second the marriage bells, the third the alarm bells and the fourth the "iron bells" of ghouls.

The association of Poe and Rachmaninoff is a peculiarly appropriate one for two reasons. With the possible exception of Berlioz, no composer has ever lived who has had so keen an appreciation of the fantastic as Rachmaninoff, and in the same way Poe stands among the poets. Then, too, Rachmaninoff has the characteristic Russian fondness for bells, a Slavic predilection which rings forth from every one of the thousands of bell towers in Russia, from the gigantic bells of the Kremlin to those of the smallest chapel. Therefore, they not only belong together from a similarity of artistic feeling, but the setting of this poem by Rachmaninoff is all the more appropriate because of the appeal of the verse to a national trait in the composed of music.

The first impulse of a lesser composer would be to fill his score full of actual bells, but Rachmaninoff has not done this. In fact, the bells as orchestral adjuncts are rarely used, but the

spirit of the various bells described in the poem are vividly suggested by the orchestration.

#### Compared With the Mahler

There is no attempt to overwhelm the hearer with mere sound or to hold constantly before him the enormous resources employed in the work, as was the case in the Mahler Eighth Symphony. Rachmaninoff has evidently kept before him one single point—the absolute fitting of the music to the thoughts conveyed by the poem—and how completely he has succeeded in this can only be judged from a hearing of the composition. The temperamental parallel of poet and musician is most aptly shown by the unanimity of thought in both artistic media, verse and music.

The four stanzas of the poem follow closely the accepted symphonic form in feeling. The first stanza, relating to the sleigh bells, has a close analogy to the first movement of a symphony, and the second corresponds to the slow movement in its tenderness and restrained beauty. The third, the alarm bells, is scherzo-like in feeling, and does what all symphonies should do, even if they all do not accomplish it—form the climax of the work.

#### A Real Symphony

In perceiving this analogy Mr. Rachmaninoff again shows his innate sympathy with the idea of the poet, and it is doubtful if there exists in English, or in any other language, another poem which would lend itself to this rigid form of treatment in music.

For this reason the work may rightfully be termed a symphony, and has probably more claim to this much-abused term (in dealing with choral works) than the Mahler Eighth or even the great Ninth of Beethoven, where, after all, the choral part is incidental to one movement and where there is no pretense of working out a complete symphonic form vocally throughout the entire composition.

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