

Kolokola (The Bells), Op. 35
Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Written: 1913

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 35 minutes

Sometimes an anonymous tip pays off. Sergei Rachmaninoff's friend Mikhail Buknik had a student who seemed particularly excited about something. She had read a Russian translation of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Bells* and felt that it simply had to be set to music. Buknik recounted what happened next:

She wrote anonymously to her idol [Rachmaninoff], suggesting that he read the poem and compose it as music. . . . summer passed, and then in the autumn she came back to Moscow for her studies. What had now happened was that she read a newspaper item that Rachmaninoff had composed an outstanding choral symphony based on Poe's Bells and it was soon to be performed. Danilova was mad with joy. . . .

Edgar Allen Poe (1809–1849) wrote *The Bells* a year before he died. It is in four verses, each one highly onomatopoeic (a word sounds like what it means). In it Poe takes the reader on a journey from "the nimbleness of youth to the pain of age." The Russian poet Konstantin Dmitriyevich Balmont (1867–1942) translated Poe's *The Bells* and inserted lines here and there to reinforce his own interpretation.

Rachmaninoff conceived of *The Bells* as a sort of four-movement "choral-symphony." The first movement evokes the sound of silver bells on a sleigh, a symbol of birth and youth. Even in this joyous movement, Balmont's verse has an ominous cloud: "Births and lives beyond all number/Waits a universal slumber—deep and sweet past all compare."

The golden bells in the slow second movement are about marriage. In this solemn setting,

Rachmaninoff won't let us be joyful. If you listen carefully, he sneaks in a favorite musical motive: the *Dies Irae* from the Roman Catholic mass for the dead ("Day of wrath, day of mourning"). The third movement, the only one without a soloist, corresponds to a symphony's scherzo. Terror-filled music representing alarm bells summons us to fight the fire: "And in hopeless resignation/Man must yield his habitation/To the warring desolation!"

Finally, the iron bells summon us to a funeral. Once again, the *Dies Irae* makes an entrance. But Rachmaninoff can't leave us despairing. After the bass sings "There is neither rest nor respite, save the quiet of the tomb," the orchestra ends the piece with music of hope.

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Lyric Suite, Op. 54

Edvard Grieg (1843–1907)

Written: 1891

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: Fifteen minutes

As a child, Edvard Grieg took piano lessons from his mother. When he was fifteen, the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull heard him play and insisted that he immediately be sent to the Leipzig conservatory in Germany. Grieg hated the dry piano exercises and repertoire—Czerny and Clementi—that he studied there. (What teenager doesn't?) A change of teachers seemed to help, but apparently the best part of the conservatory for Grieg was being able to hear so many concerts. He was back in Norway by the time he turned nineteen. In spite of his success as a pianist back home, he was unable to make a living at it, so he moved to Denmark. It was there, about five years later, that Edmund Neupert performed Grieg's *Concerto in A Minor*. He

wrote to Grieg about its reception: “The triumph . . . was tremendous,” Neupert reported.

While he was in Denmark, Grieg met another young Norwegian composer, Rikard Nordraak. The two formed the Euterpe Society with the purpose of promoting Scandinavian music. For the rest of his life, Grieg dedicated himself to being a “Romantic nationalist” and to writing in a distinctly Norwegian style.

Some of Grieg’s most characteristically “Norwegian” pieces are 66 short works for piano—collectively known as “Lyric Pieces”—that he wrote between 1867 and 1901. He wrote the pieces you will hear today in 1891 and arranged the first of the set, *Shepherd Boy*, for strings. About ten years later, Grieg learned that Anton Seidl, the conductor of the New York Philharmonic, had previously arranged four of the pieces for orchestra. Grieg felt Seidl’s orchestration was a bit too “Wagnerian,” so he diplomatically wrote to Seidl’s widow:

This orchestration is excellent in itself; nevertheless, in accordance with my own intentions, I have made many revisions in some of the pieces, while others I have left out altogether or orchestrated afresh.

The melancholic *Shepherd Boy* begins gently, becomes more impassioned, and then fades away. The second movement, *Gangar*, is a sort of walking tune. It sways along, sometimes strutting. The tender *Nocturne* comes complete with bird-song. The *March of the Dwarfs* is one of Grieg’s most famous works. Justifiably so.

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Taras Bulba

Leoš Janáček (1854–1928)

Written: 1915–1918

Movements: Three

Style: 20th Century Nationalism

Duration: 23 minutes

Leoš Janáček was what you might call a musical “late boomer.” He was one of thirteen children born into a family of passionate amateur musicians. His father recognized his son’s abilities early on, and sent young Leoš to the Queen’s Monastery in nearby Brno, Moravia (now the Czech Republic). For decades, Janáček spent his time diligently composing, studying Moravian folk songs, and teaching in Brno. Although he demonstrated considerable talent his whole life, especially as a composer of opera, Janáček composed in virtual anonymity. It wasn’t until he was in his sixties, when his opera *Jenufa* was finally performed in Prague, that he made it into the “big time.”

Janáček wrote *Taras Bulba* during World War I, just as the Russian army was approaching the border of his homeland. Ironically, Janáček loved all things Russian and hoped that Russia would help his own country gain independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He based his symphonic poem on the story by the Russian writer Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol about the Cossack leader Taras Bulba, who led an uprising against the Poles in 1628. The first movement, *The Death of Andrei*, depicts Taras’s youngest son who falls in love with the daughter of a Polish general. Andrei, who is fighting on the side of the Poles, comes face-to-

face with his father. Realizing his disloyalty, Andrei allows himself to be killed by his father. While the music illustrates the love between the two youngsters, there is a more turbulent section depicting the battle between the Russians and the Poles.

The second movement is about Taras Bulba's other son, Ostap. He has been captured by the Poles. Taras sneaks into the Polish camp and witnesses his son's execution. At the moment of Ostap's death, Taras cries out, and then there is a wild mazurka as the Poles dance in triumph.

In the final movement, The Prophecy and Death of Taras Bulba, the Cossacks fight against the Poles, avenging the death of Ostap. Taras is captured, but before he is burned at the stake he cries out, "Do you think that there is anything in the world that a Cossack fears? A Tsar shall arise from Russian soil, and there shall not be a power in the world which shall not submit to him!"

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