

BELLS AND BELL-RINGING: THE UNIQUENESS OF RACHMANINOFF'S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

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Abstract

Bells hold a prominent place in Sergei Rachmaninoff's musical legacy. Throughout his career, bells grew from an inspirational source into one of the most distinctive characteristic features of his unique style, and largely defined his compositional thinking. From Rachmaninoff's student period pieces through the last opus of his oeuvre, bells and bell-ringing are present in various ways, in all components of his musical language, and to such an extent that it constitutes the fundamental essence of his creative identity. The main objective of this study is to introduce this specific phenomenon while pointing out its importance in the context of the composer's work. The article discusses specific examples of bell imitations in Rachmaninoff's compositions, outlines their contexts, and presents which components of the musical structure were most influenced by bell-ringing.

Keywords

Bells, bell-ringing, compositional thinking, musical legacy, Sergei Rachmaninoff

Introduction

The priority of my paper was to examine the works of Sergei Rachmaninoff in order to confirm the theory that the phenomenon of bell-ringing constitutes one of the fundamental constants of his individual musical language.

Through a detailed study of the preserved correspondence and published reminiscences of the composer, I pointed out the main

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attributes forming his compositional style. I also focused on the study of the historical development and typology of bells, mapped the traditions of bell-ringing, and explored the genesis of bell sonority in Russian art music.

The main section is devoted to bells and bell-ringing in Rachmaninoff's works. I assessed the components of the musical structure of Rachmaninoff's works that were most influenced by the bells and highlighted the most striking examples of compositions with bell-ringing imitation, as well as their contexts.

On the basis of research and musical analysis of Rachmaninoff's works, I can conclude that bell-ringing as a dominating sonic specificity manifested itself in his compositional legacy in an exceptionally strong way and on various levels.

In the first case, it is part of the musical plot of a work where the imitation of bell-ringing is used consciously and purposefully (e.g. *Suite Op. 5*, *The Bells Op. 35*). In the second case, bell-ringing is (often subconsciously) implemented into the compositional structure, where the individual components of the music are influenced by the sonority of the bells (e.g. *Preludes and Etudes-Tableaux*). The presence of bell-ringing in Rachmaninoff's music has both acoustic qualities and thus creates a characteristic sound environment (base) of the composition, but at the same time it can have symbolic connotations and represent a sounding image (while not being a symbol per se⁹⁹).

In Rachmaninoff's music, the line between conscious and subconscious use of bell-ringing is very thin. This is evidenced by the frequent identity of the musical material of compositions with a plot that includes bell-ringing (conscious presence of bells) with that of compositions whose bell-ringing content was not intended by the composer (subconscious presence of bells). It is possible to conclude this through a two-stage comparative analysis. First, I searched for an exact match between the sound of the Orthodox bell-ringing and the compositions with plot of bell-ringing. I then compared the musical structure of the compositions of conscious bell-ringing with those of subconscious presence of bells.

Bell Typology and the Orthodox Bell-ringing

Since the 16th century, the Orthodox tradition has been using the so-called "yazychnyy" (yazyk = clapper) principle of bell-ringing. One bell-ringer operates several bells at once with both hands and feet by means of ropes tied to the clapper of the bell. The basis of the Orthodox tradition

⁹⁹ A symbol gives us a specific meaning, while an image only gives us an indirect (metaphorical) one.

is rhythmic bell-ringing within a specific tempo and character. The bells inside an Orthodox bell tower are divided into three groups: *zazvonnye* (small), *podzvonnye* (medium) and *blagovestniki* (large), with one bell ringer able to operate all the bells using a distinctive bell-ringing technique.

The small bells are operated by the bell-ringer's right hand. Depending on the region a bell tower may have two (Rostov), three (in the north) or four (Lavra) bells. The most widespread type is the one with three bells. In the case of the small bells, their name ("zazvonnye kolokola") suggests their purpose; the bell-ringer uses them to perform the most interesting motivic variations to attract the listener's attention.

The medium bells ("podzvonnye kolokola") are usually attached to the bell-ringer's desk by chains and are operated with the bell-ringer's left hand. The number of medium-sized bells can vary. While between four and six is the standard amount, some bell towers can have up to fifteen medium-sized bells, contributing to the overall richness of the bell set.

The large bells ("blagovestniki", meaning "blessing bells" in Russian) are operated with the bell-ringer's right foot by means of pedals. This groups mostly includes bells of over six tons whose tongue is too difficult to be set in motion by the bell-ringer's hand. Bell towers can have up to five large bells, but those weighing more than ten tons are rung separately by another bell ringer.

There are four main types of canonical bell-ringing: *blagovest*, *trezvon*, *perebor* and *perezvon*.

Blagovest - regular strikes (one at a time) on a large bell (*blagovestnik*).

Perebor – funeral bell. The entire group of bells is rung by successive strikes on each bell from the smallest to the largest, followed by a single strike on all of them at once.

Perezvon – a sad or celebratory type of bell-ringing. It is performed by successive strikes on each bell from the largest to the smallest.

Trezvon – several simultaneously sounding bells. They come in several variations depending on the tradition.

Other methods also used in worship in addition to those mentioned above are *vodosviatnyi perezvon*, *zvon v dvoi* and *krasnyi zvon*.

Vodosviatnyi perezvon (on the occasion of the sanctification of water) – successive strikes from the largest bell to the smallest one with seven strikes on each.

Zvon v dvoi (Ringing on two) – in this case, only two bells are rung: the Lenten bell and the small bell. At first, the bells are rung one at a time in alteration, with one simultaneous strike on both at the end.

Krasnyi zvon – this term refers to the practice of bell-ringing all available bells in cathedrals and monasteries (especially with a large number of big bells). This type of bell-ringing typically involves multiple bell ringers—usually five or more—working together to produce a grand, full-bodied sound.

The delivery of bell-ringing also includes an introduction to the bell-ringing and an ending (in other words, an introduction and a coda).

Apart from being an essential part of the Orthodox worship, bells were also used to summon folk gatherings called the "veche" (*vechevoi* bell) and to express joy or sorrow. Bell-ringing often accompanied the everyday life of ordinary people. For example, a joyful and solemn bell-ringing on all the bells (*trezvon*) was used to celebrate victory over the enemy and the return of the regiment from the battlefield. Bell-ringing also served as navigation for pilgrims who got lost in bad weather, and it could also signal danger or misfortune. This led to the emergence of various types of bell-ringing outside the church tradition. A particularly important type of bell-ringing in the secular tradition is the alarm bell-ringing called *nabat*. This bell-ringing is characteristic for the continuous frequent striking of a large bell used as a warning signal in the event of fire, flood, rebellion, invasion or other human catastrophe.¹⁰⁰

Bells in Russian art music

Russian composers realised the artistic and aesthetic value of Orthodox bell-ringing a long time ago. The bell-ringing tradition had a significant influence on the formation of the Russian school and presented an integral attribute of the development of Russian art music in general. Similar to folk songs, elements of folk dances and church chants, bell-ringing organically became part of composed music. As an inseparable part of everyday life in Russian towns and villages, church bells have had an intense influence on the thinking and creative work of every artist since childhood. Russian composers and musicologists repeatedly mentioned bells in their recollections of musical impressions from their childhood. Boris Asafiev said: „The rhythmicity of bell-ringing belongs to the category of impressions instilled in our consciousness from early childhood.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ I. M. Drozdikhin, *Uchebnoye posobiye dlya zvonarey khramov I monastyrey*. (Moscow: Masterskaya Il'I Drozdikhina, 2017)

¹⁰¹ V. Kovalyov, *Razdaysya, blagovestnyy zvon (Kolokola v istorii kul'tury)*. (Minsk, 2003), 103.

Music critic Vladimir Stasov commented on multiple musical compositions with these words: „The bells are ringing again! The Russian school cannot live without them.“¹⁰²

In his notes, Mikhail Glinka himself described the role of the Orthodox bell-ringing in shaping his musical world by saying: „Musical talent at that time was expressed by an affection for bell-ringing (trezvon). I eagerly listened to those piercing sounds and skillfully imitated them on two copper bowls. Whenever I was ill, people brought little bells into my room to console me.“¹⁰³

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov said the following about his compositional work: „Here comes the bell-ringing once again! So many times and in so many different forms have I reproduced by instrumentation this irreplaceable phenomenon of ancient Russian life that has survived to our times.“¹⁰⁴

The sonic aspect of bells played a significant role in the development of the instrumentation and timbre of Russian music. It also influenced the structure of the musical works and the compositional style of various composers.

The first to incorporate bell-ringing into musical composition was Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka. His opera *A Life for the Tsar (Ivan Susanin)* was the first to use Orthodox bell-ringing in art music. They appear in the final, climactic scene of the opera. Glinka emphasised the importance of this scene through the synchronous overlap of different layers of Orthodox bell-ringing, the parts of the orchestra and the choir.

Orthodox bell-ringing took firm root in the life work of composers of the Russian school, and to this day it is often used as the main idea of a composition, to characterize a particularly important image of the stage action, or to embody the mental state of a hero. Examples include works such as *Prince Igor* (A. Borodin), *The Maid of Pskov*, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya* (N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov), *The Oprichnik*, *Overture 1812* (P.I. Tchaikovsky), *Boris Godunov* (M.P. Mussorgsky). Authentic church bells were installed in several theaters (e.g. the *Bolshoi Theatre* in Moscow and the *Mariinsky Theatre* in Saint Petersburg) because of the production of this opera.

It should be noted that the notation of Orthodox bell-ringing in an orchestral score is never written out precisely, but rather indicated either rhythmically or verbally. The notation signals the presence of bell-ringing,

¹⁰² Ibid., 104.

¹⁰³ M. I. Glinka, *Zapiski*. (Moscow, 1953), 23.

¹⁰⁴ N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Letopis' moyey muzykal'noy zhizni*. (Moscow, 1955), 480.

but does not define the actual relationships between the bells. Sometimes the moment of onset is indicated simply by words, e. g. "begin the bell-ringing", "ring to raise alarm" "funeral peal", etc.

In addition to using real Orthodox bells, composers also implemented stylisations of bell-ringing in their compositional work. The first composer to imitate bells in his work thus become the founder of the imitative tradition was Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky. In his opera *Boris Godunov* (*in the Coronation Scene*), he specifically imitated the bells of Ivan the Great, using two chords (Ab7 and D7) as the basis of the imitation. This was a rather unusual technique for his time, not only because the chords themselves are spaced apart at the interval of a tritone (Ab to D), but the structure of all of the chords also includes a tritone, resulting in a characteristic dissonance.

Among the masters in creating bell effects through orchestral instrumentation were M. P. Mussorgsky (*Overture to the opera Khovanshchina*) and N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov (*Russian Easter Festival Overture: Overture on Liturgical Themes*). The imitation of bell sonorities on the piano is also present in the works of several Russian composers (Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Borodin, and others).

Bells in the works of Sergei Rachmaninoff

Rachmaninoff's musical work is usually seen within the context of his influence on cultural history, but to understand his compositional legacy more deeply it is useful to raise the opposite question of how the culture he grew up and worked in influenced the composer himself, beginning with his early compositional experiences.

His musical thinking can therefore be better understood through the spheres he was attached to from his early childhood and which he later directly implemented in his compositions. Among the strongest influences that shaped Rachmaninoff's compositional style, the Old Russian liturgical chants and the tradition of Orthodox bell-ringing must be mentioned first. These influences appeared, either directly or indirectly, throughout all creative periods of Rachmaninoff's career, gradually evolving into a coherent musical language.

Rachmaninoff's grandmother had a great influence on the development of his musical talent and his development into a composer. Sofia Butakova had an excellent knowledge of the Old Russian church music and was considered an undisputed authority in this field. The young Rachmaninoff often attended services with her in Saint Petersburg, where he was captivated by the choral chants which he would immediately play on the piano upon his arrival home from the church. Rachmaninoff was

equally impressed by Velikiy Novgorod,¹⁰⁵ rich in historic cathedrals and monasteries, where he spent the summer of 1883 with his grandmother at the age of ten. Her house was often visited by famous masters of the Novgorod church singing and Orthodox bell-ringing. A particularly valuable guest at Sofia Butakova's house was a renowned church bell virtuoso, known as "Yegorka the Bell-ringer", whom Rachmaninoff knew very well and from whom he learned a lot of valuable knowledge about bell-ringing. The next two summers (1883 and 1884) were the happiest periods of Rachmaninoff's childhood. It was then that, under the influence of the daily bell-ringing of the Novgorod church bells and choral singing, Rachmaninoff's desire to compose his own music first surfaced.¹⁰⁶ In Novgorod and Saint Petersburg, the young composer had the opportunity to become familiar with the three main types of church singing (original compositions, harmonisation of monophonic ceremonial chants and authentic liturgical singing). Subsequently, after moving to Moscow in 1885, he expanded his knowledge of choral church singing traditions.¹⁰⁷ In the academic year 1890/91, Rachmaninoff took a course in the history of church music at the conservatory under S.V. Smolensky, an eminent scholar of Old Russian liturgical chants.¹⁰⁸ Rachmaninoff, having become familiar with church singing and absorbing inspiration from this music at an early age, wrote the following in 1935: „The choir really made me joyful as they performed a variety of my favorite church chants. They sing sacred music well!“¹⁰⁹

A close friend of Rachmaninoff, composer Alexander Goedicke, wrote in his memoirs:

Rachmaninoff was very fond of church singing and often, even during the winter, he would get up at seven o'clock in the morning, hire a coachman while it was still dark, and go (in most cases) to Andronikov Monastery in Taganka region, where he would listen for

¹⁰⁵ The Novgorod region, after the disintegration of Kievan Rus, persisted in preserving and continuing the age-old traditions of Old Russian singing culture. Its own artistic style developed long ago, which was particularly evident in the peculiar structure of the chants, in the peculiarity of the form and in the high mastery of the Novgorod bell-ringers.

¹⁰⁶ V. Bryantseva, *S. V. Rachmaninov*. (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1976), 163-166.

¹⁰⁷ V. Sokolova, *Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff*. (Moscow: Muzyka, 1984), 57.

¹⁰⁸ Smolensky was the director of the Moscow Synodal School of Church Singing, a musicologist and pedagogue. Among his contemporaries, he passionately promoted the revival of the Orthodox singing tradition and the creation of works drawing musical material from authentic ancient chants.

¹⁰⁹ Z. Apetyan, *Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove*. (Moscow: GMI, 1961), 11-12.

hours to the ancient austere chants from the octoechos, interpreted by the monks in parallel fifths.¹¹⁰

Sergei Rachmaninoff's interest in the melodies of liturgical chants which he knew from his childhood intensified over time, but he was much more impressed by the bell-ringer's interpretative mastery. It was his affection for the phenomenon of Orthodox bell-ringing that largely defined his compositional style.

The Influence of Bells on the Structure of Rachmaninoff's Compositions

Through a detailed analysis of specific compositions in a chronological sequence, I have concluded that the bell-like quality in Rachmaninoff's compositional legacy was particularly evident. From his student compositions to the last opus of his oeuvre, bells and bell-ringing are present in different variations and to such a high extent that they appear to constitute the most characteristic feature of Rachmaninoff's compositional language. The presence of this sound specificity can be felt in all components (rhythmicity, melodicity, harmony, instrumentation, timbre, texture, the overall compositional structure) of the musical language.

Rhythmicity

The rhythmic structure of many of Rachmaninoff's compositions was created through the implementation of bell rhythms and their variations. Entire complexes emerged and formed the basis of the musical structure – an ostinato-like pulsation in long rhythmic values (imitation of the blagovest) and a rhythmic-melodic motivic structure in short rhythmic values of various irregular syncopated forms of a dance-like character (imitation of the zazvonnye bells and podzvonnye bells). The ambivalence of the bell rhythmic motifs was used to bring contrast and enhance the musical plot, and their fusion was often exploited in the climactic sections.

The first composition in which Sergei Rachmaninoff imitated the sound of bells was his early *Nocturne in C minor No. 3*, composed in the winter of 1888. Right at the beginning of the piece, the composer clearly outlined a sonic image of bell-ringing, whose rhythmic structure corresponds to the bell patterns of the Moscow tradition (Figure No. 1). At the same time, it correlates with the musical material of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Easter Overture*, which also features a bell theme (Figure No.

¹¹⁰ Z. Apetyan, *Literaturnoye naslediyе*. (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1980), 64-65.

3). The composer himself described this theme as “a sonic reproduction of joyful, almost dance-like bell-ringing.”



Figure 1: Orthodox bell-ringing – Trezvon



Figure 2: Rachmaninoff – Nocturne C minor, No. 3 (1888)



Figure 3: Rimsky-Korsakov – Easter Overture (section from letter H, clarinet part)

Melodicity

The *cantabile* character of the melodies is the solid foundation of Rachmaninoff's compositional style of one of its most prominent features. Many of the themes in Rachmaninoff's compositions were influenced by the sound of Old Russian chants and are closely linked to the bells intonations. These influences are greatly reflected in the character of the motifs that form the main melodic line in the compositions. They often consist of a continuous chain of variants of one and the same motivic nucleus in different sonorities. This is a key principle of melodic development in the composer's work, which, apart from Russian folk song, has its origins primarily in the Old Russian church singing. The roots of melodic variation in the thematic areas of Rachmaninoff's compositions can be traced down mainly to liturgical chants. The predominance of second, third and fourth interval relations in the motivic-thematic structure also comes from these. However, the same relations are also inherent to the melodic structure of the bell-ringing. The links between the Old Russian melodies and bell-ringing intonations are the result of

their simultaneous historical development. In Rachmaninoff's melodic structures, bell-like melodicism is present in the form of short motifs of a narrow ambitus, ostinato melodic intervals or a stepwise motion of harmonically sounding intervals, which create a characteristic effect of bell-like oscillations.

Among the most striking pieces of the opus is *Moment musical in E minor, Op. 16 No. 4*, which, in addition to its ostinato-based *nabat* motif in the main theme (a leap from the note B to the consonant third E–G), features in its episodic sections an intriguing bell-like sonority. This effect is achieved through the alternation of upper and lower voices, thus evoking the sounds of overtones and undertones of bell-ringing (Figure No. 4).

Rachmaninoff had already imitated this style of bell-ringing in his student composition *Fugue in D minor* (1891), whose complete form was long considered lost. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, the missing pages were rediscovered by Moscow musicologist V. Antipov (Figure No. 5).

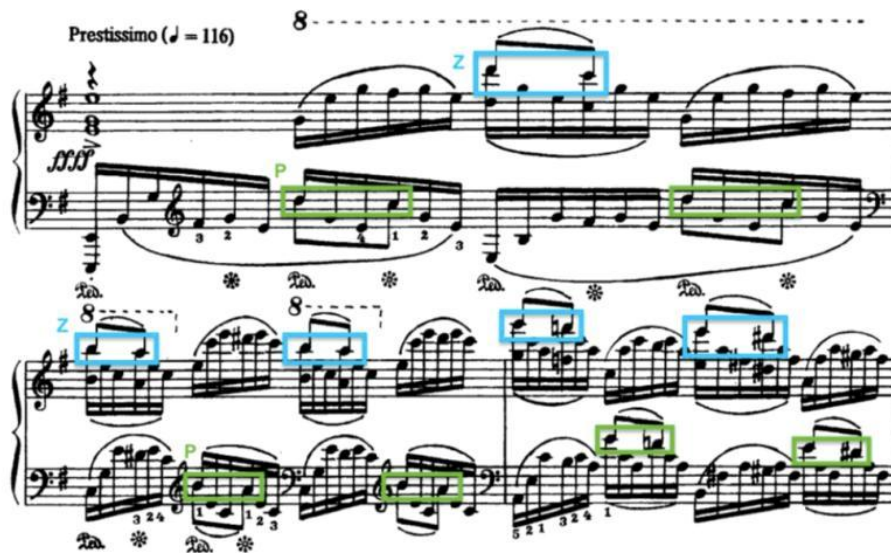


Figure 4: Rachmaninoff – *Moment musical E minor, Op. 16. No. 4*



Figure 5: Rachmaninoff – *Fugue D minor (1891)*

Harmony

The main role of harmony in the context of bell sonority is to reproduce the aliquot complexes that are characteristic especially of the massive sound of the blagovest, but also of the simultaneous sound of several groups of bells within the trezvon. Since clusters were not commonly used in composition during Rachmaninoff's lifetime, to imitate the characteristic sonority the composer opted for complex chromatic harmonies and chordal structures of both tertian (all types of seventh chords) and other interval construction (with an added second, a sixth, an alternating seventh, etc.), which have a purely sonic significance and fulfil a sonoric function in the composition. Rachmaninoff illustrated the dissonant sound of the bells by implementing specific aliquots through of a characteristic technique present in all works with the imitation of the blagovest. This technique involved combining unrelated chords that share a common tone (most often in the bass, exceptionally in the upper voices), which often produced a sequence of chords of peculiar construction with atypical interrelationships, e.g. a secondary dominant seventh chord to the Phrygian or to the 7th natural degree.

This stems from the fact that Rachmaninoff did not conceptualise the resulting chords in the context of functional harmony, but in the context of timbre and sonority of the chords. Therefore, chromatically progressive lines emerge in the middle voices of the superstructure consonants to the lower common tone. Another characteristic phenomenon is also the position of the musical material on the subdominant plane within the above progression, which in many cases is based on the function of the bass ostinato tone itself. A specific compositional technique arises when the ostinato bass line is made up of two tones. The organization of the remaining musical material is then modified based on the progression of the bass line.

An ideal example of the imitation of bell-like overtone complexes through harmonic structures and progressions is the coda of the *Prelude in C-sharp minor* (Figure No. 6). Its musical material closely resembles the bell imitation found in the piano transcription of the *Coronation Scene* from Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* (Figure No. 7).

The coda's musical material, built on the subdominant level, consists of several layers. The bass line is rendered in doubled octaves in the lowest register, aiming to evoke the sonority of the largest and deepest-sounding *blagovestnik* bells. The upper voices follow a chordal progression (derived from a common bass tone), imitating the polyphonic

and overtone-rich resonance of mid-sized bells. The coda concludes with a final “strike of all the bells” in the form of a tonic triad in C-sharp minor.



Figure 6: Rachmaninoff – Prelude C sharp minor, Op. 3. No 2. (coda)



Figure 7: Mussorgsky – Coronation Scene from the opera Boris Godunov
(piano transcription)

Instrumentation

The stylization of bell-ringing on orchestral instruments was used to achieve the timbre of different types of bells, ranging from all groups of Orthodox bells, through alarm bell-ringing, to the sonority of small bells. The imitation of large bells (*blagovestniki*) is based on the use of musical instruments such as double basses, low-register brass instruments (which give the impression of a metallic sound), also various percussion instruments (of a rumbling sound) such as cymbals, gongs, tam-tam. The bell-ringing of the melodic bells is reproduced by bell-ringing wind instruments of high registers (piccolo, flute), as well as harp, piano, celesta and last but not least instruments of typical sonorities such as *glockenspiel*, tubular bells or sleigh bells.

Although latent stages of bell sonorities can already be found in Rachmaninoff's first symphonic attempt—his one-movement *Youth Symphony in D minor* from 1891—it is more appropriate, from the

perspective of orchestral instrumentation, to consider the climactic movements of his full four-movement *Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 13* (composed a few years later in 1895) as a mature example of bell imitation.

Right from the opening climactic section of the first movement, beginning at the *Più vivo* marking, the main theme starts to develop into a polyphonic peak that imitates a powerful *trezvon* (a rich, multi-layered bell peal). In the central bell-themed climax of the first movement—starting at the *Maestoso* section—the musical structure imitating bell-ringing no longer absorbs the main theme as it did in the *Più vivo* section. Instead, the ostinato bell-ringing of the *zazvonnye* bells, composed of two rhythmically distinct layers (Layer 1 – piccolo, flute, and oboe parts; Layer 2 – clarinet, bassoon, and French horn parts), is now subordinated to a new thematic sonority.

This new sound takes the form of a separate melodic line representing the *podzvonnye* (lower) bells, performed by trombones and tuba. Episodically interwoven into the flowing musical narrative—evoking the heavy tolling of the *trezvon*—are motifs of the alarm-like *nabat* bell, carried by the trumpet section.

The image shows a page from a musical score for Rachmaninoff's Symphony in D minor No. 1, Op. 13, first movement, Maestoso section. The score is divided into four color-coded groups, each with a label on the right side. The ZAZVONNYE 1st group (blue) includes Flauti (I, II), Oboi, and Clarineti (B). The ZAZVONNYE 2nd group (blue) includes Fagotti and Corni (F). The NABAT (alarm bell) (red) group includes Trombe (I, II, III). The PODZVONNYE (green) group includes Tromboni and Tuba. The score is marked 'Toso d: 128' and 'Maestoso'. The ZAZVONNYE 1st group and ZAZVONNYE 2nd group are grouped together in a blue box. The NABAT group is highlighted with a red box. The PODZVONNYE group is highlighted with a green box.

Figure 8: Rachmaninoff – *Symphony in D minor No. 1, Op. 13*, first movement, *Maestoso* section

Timbre

Rachmaninoff's implementation of bell-like sounds is not limited to his piano compositions. The sonority of bell-ringing naturally permeated his

choral works, where it acquired quite a unique tone color. The composer made use of all voices and by grouping, juxtaposing, dividing and joining individual parts, he achieved new specific sonic effects, of which the atypical ones that deserve special attention are the bell-ringing effects.

At the beginning of 1915, Rachmaninoff composed a magnificent work for mixed a cappella choir — *Vsenoshchnoye bdeniye*, Op. 37 — which he dedicated to the memory of his teacher Stepan Smolensky. The use of bell-like sonorities is incorporated into nearly every movement of the *Vsenoshchnoye bdeniye*. However, the most striking example appears in the seventh movement of the cycle, *Shestopsalmiye*. The even tolling of bells is imitated at the opening of the piece through the tenor voices (Figure No. 9). Rachmaninoff employs the same approach to bell imitation in the twelfth movement, *Slavosloviye velikoye* (Figure No. 10).

In the introduction to *Shestopsalmiye*, two distinct lines can be identified that imitate the bell-ringing of two mid-range melodic bells (*podzvonnye*). The first tenor represents a smaller bell, with a melody that moves stepwise both downward and upward (E \flat –D–C–D). The second tenor portrays a larger bell, and its line incorporates not only stepwise motion but also a fourth-leap at the beginning of the motif (C–G–A \flat –B \flat).

An especially interesting element that enhances the impression of bell-ringing is the phrasing of this passage. Rachmaninoff divides the flowing tenor line, written in half-note values, into phrased groupings (3–2–2–2–4), which results in a subtle shift of perceived accents and creates associations with the characteristic rhythmic pattern of bell peals.



Figure 9: Rachmaninoff – *Shestopsalmiye*, Op. 37 No. 7 (tenor part, bars 1–2)



Figure 10: Rachmaninoff – *Slavosloviye velikoye*, Op. 37 No. 12 (tenor part, bars 4–5)

Gradually, to the sound of the *podzvonnye* (lower) bells, the *zazvonnye* (upper) bells are added, which the composer imitates using triads that alternate between the soprano and tenor voices. While the regular repetition of a major triad (A \flat major), played twice in half-note values, represents shorter, more precise bell strikes, the minor triad (C minor) in the tenor captures the realistic sound of a bell along with its

characteristic resonance. Rachmaninoff expresses this resonance by elongating the rhythmic values of the chord tones and adding an extra melodic note, B \flat .

In the following bars, the bell motif is freely repeated. In the soprano, the major triad (E \flat major) sounds twice, while in the tenor, a minor triad (G minor) appears, enriched with two harmonically resonant major thirds: A \flat -C and B \flat -D.



Figure 11: Rachmaninoff – Shestopsalmiye, Op. 37 No. 7
(imitation of the alternation of upper and lower bells)

From the pair of triads A \flat major and C minor, a *trezvon* climax later emerges.

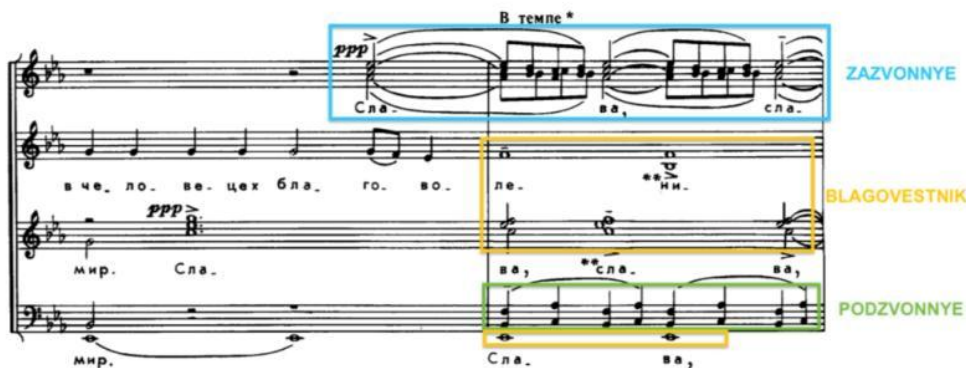


Figure 12: Rachmaninoff – Shestopsalmiye, Op. 37 No. 7 (trezvon climax)

Other methods of creating bell-ringing effects in *Vsenoshchnoye bdeniye*, Op. 37, include:

1. the movement of voices based on the rhythmic pattern of zazvonnye (upper) bells.



Figure 13: Rachmaninoff – Khvalite imya Gospodne, Op. 37 No. 8, soprano part from bar 9 (rhythmic pattern of upper bells, 1st variant)

2. the effect of bell-like swaying, achieved through ostinato motion of the voices in stepwise (second) intervals.



Figure 14: Rachmaninoff – Khvalite imya Gospodne, Op. 37 No. 8, soprano part from bar 21 (rhythmic pattern of upper bells, 2nd variant)

Texture

Through the analysis (especially of piano works), I found that the organization of the musical material is often based on the layers of the individual bell groups. The texture usually includes three voice lines, imitating the trezvon of all bells: the lower line of the blagovestnik, the middle line of the podzvonnye, and the upper line of the zazvonnye. In some cases, I found modified variants of the trezvon texture: either just two lines, but in a sonically thickened form, or three traditional lines supplemented by an additional layer of nabat bell-ringing, funeral perebor or podduzhnyy bell and sleigh bells. The overlapping and combination of different bell layers is also very common, usually allowing the composer to achieve a climax in the musical plot.

One of the most vivid pieces of the opus is the *Étude in E-flat major*, Op. 33 No. 7, which the composer described as a "fairground scene." The musical content is set in a festive atmosphere and portrays authentic traditions, which Rachmaninoff expressed through folk-like melodic writing combined with the bell-ringing of celebratory bells.

The initial fragment of the bell motif appears as an opening fanfare, which gradually unfolds and grows into a jubilant *trezvon*—the climax of the piece (Molto marcato section). The coda of the *Étude in E-flat major* is also built on a multi-layered texture that depicts the pealing of all the bells.



Figure 15: Rachmaninoff – *Étude in E-flat major*, Op. 33 No. 7
(Molto marcato section depicting a festive *trezvon*)

The overall compositional structure

The stylization of the bell-ringing plays an important role in the context of the overall structure of the composition. The most striking uses of bell sonorities are found in the introductions, climactic sections and codas, with a different way of conveying the different bell-ringing characters for each of these. The introductory sections are often characteristic for the reproduction of the sonic aspect of the bell-ringing, its aliquot complexes and specific timbre (e.g. Piano Concerto for C Minor Piano No. 2, Op. 18). In the developmental sections, the influence of the sonority of the bells on the syntactic structures and on the character of the melodic line is most evident. The climactic sections are almost always made up of massive *trezvon* bell-ringing with a polyphonic treatment of the musical material. The concluding sections use one of these methods or their combinations.

Imitation of Bells in Rachmaninoff's Composition

Before arriving in Lebedyn, where Rachmaninoff composed bell-inspired composition in 1893, he visited his grandmother in Velikiy Novgorod after they had not seen each other for a few years. Returning to his childhood home, Rachmaninoff's compositional ideas became infused with his childhood memories as he revived a source of inspiration once born in the local environment. Incited by the resonant bell-ringing of Novgorod's church bells, Rachmaninoff created new "bell-like musical pictures" - Suite for Two Pianos No. 1, Op. 5.¹¹¹ The general concept of the work is based on the depictions of individual episodes in a person's life (youthful dreams, moments of love, experiences of grief, holiday celebrations). The

¹¹¹ V. Bryantseva, S. V. Rachmaninov, 67.

cycle is also unified by a characteristic descending motif consisting of four notes. In the first movements (*Barcarolle - The night...the love...*) it appears episodically, in the last movements (*The Tears - Easter*¹¹²) it fills the entire musical structure together with the sound of the church bells. In the third movement, the composer imitates mournful bell-ringing and in the final movement festive bell-ringing. Both the *Tears* and *Easter* movements are echoes Rachmaninoff's memories, depicting contrasting images of life at his time. Rachmaninoff explains the context of composing the third movement himself:

One of my fondest childhood recollections is associated with the four notes of the great bells in the St. Sophia Cathedral of Novgorod, which I often heard when my grandmother took me to town on church festival days. The bellringers were artists. The four notes were a theme that recurred again and again, four silvery weeping notes, veiled in an everchanging accompaniment woven around them. I always associated the idea of tears with them. Many years later I composed a Suite for two pianos, in four movements, each developing a poetic motto. For the third movement, prefaced by Tiutchev's poem, „Tears“, I knew at once the ideal theme - and the cathedral bells of Novgorod sang again.¹¹³

In the movement *Tears*, Rachmaninoff did not resort to organising the musical material in a way that would only portray the sonic side of the church bell-ringing *trezvon*. The "four silvery weeping tones" (B - A - G - Eb), based on the statements of the local bell-ringers, most likely belonged to the middle melodic bells of Novgorod Cathedral. The tones of the bell motif are constantly heard in a rhythmically strict and free melodically varying ostinato, which, in according to the Rachmaninoff himself, is surrounded by a constantly changing accompaniment. The supporting melody undergoes various transformations within the movement. In some sections, it sounds doubled or has its diatonic sequence saturated with chromaticisms. Only the rhythm of the motif remains unchanged throughout the musical piece and progresses smoothly in the same manner, albeit within an ever-changing texture. This multi-layered background of melodically and harmonically saturated figurations merges into a massive bell-ringing, creating the climax of the piece.

Not only do the bells create a specific timbral element in this composition, but they also fulfill a figurative and symbolic function.

¹¹² Title in Russian: Svetlyy prazdnik.

¹¹³ S. Bertensson, *Sergei Rachmaninoff. A lifetime in music*. (New York: New York University Press, 1956), 184.

Similarly to the bell-ringing (the precursor to the unrest in the *Coronation scene of Boris* from Mussorgsky's opera or the alarm bell-ringing in the finale of the first act of Alexander Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*), in Suite Op. 5 the bells express sorrowful feelings and, with their descending melodic progression depict falling human tears. While earlier composers mostly imitated a mighty celebratory or alarm bell-ringing in their compositions, Rachmaninoff also depicts the melodic aspect of the bells and thus gives the bell-ringing an unusually singing character. Rachmaninoff's "Novgorod bells theme" is no longer presented merely as a bell-like harmonic structure (e.g. as in Mussorgsky's composition), but as a melodic line growing out of mournful intonations. The lament of the bell, forming the main theme of the composition, is also the supporting element of further musical development, to which the other accompanying motifs are subordinated. The musical plot of the piece is first concentrated on the ostinato motif itself for a long time. Subsequently, its main intervals (especially the interval of the tritone Eb-A, creating a peculiar tension in the motif) form the motivic core of the harmonically condensed progression of the middle section. The ostinato melody of the opening disappears in the complex harmony which brings on the climactic tension. The melodic and figurative development of the theme intensifies (no longer slow dripping tears but a strong flowing stream).

The musical progression of the third movement of the Suite Op. 5 is based on a free ostinato development of the descending motif of the "weeping bells", sounding simultaneously with the accompanying voices which also have a bell-ringing character. After a climactic build-up to the mighty bell-ringing of all the bells of the Orthodox bell tower, the melodic theme returns at the end of the piece, leading up to the final coda.



Figure 10: Rachmaninoff – Suite for Two Pianos No. 1 op. 5, movement III: "Tears" (the Novgorod bell theme)



Figure 11: Rachmaninoff – Suite for Two Pianos No. 1 op. 5, movement III: “Tears” (a contrasting section imitating trezvon)

In the finale of Suite Op. 5 (*Easter*), the soundscape of the festive Easter bell-ringing is presented in drastic contrast to the previous third movement. In addition to the characteristic rhythmicity in the first piano part, the introduction also explores non-standard bell material. Indeed, the second piano part is based on a contrasting variant of the introduction and depicts a typical conclusion to the bell-ringing.



Figure 16: The closing section of a bell-ringing performance

The coda is imitated initially by a descending motion of harmonically sounding minor thirds (C-Eb), then perfect fifths (D-A / G-D / E-B), and culminating in a characteristic "strike on all the bells", in the form of a threefold repetition of a half-diminished seventh chord in first inversion (C - G - A - Eb).



Figure 12: Rachmaninoff – Suite for Two Pianos No. 1 op. 5, movement IV “Easter” (Introduction)

A hint of the rhythmic structure of the main ostinato theme, imitating the continuous bell-ringing of small bells, is already present in Rachmaninoff's student composition, Nocturne in C minor (1888). The young Rachmaninoff captured the rhythmic dance intonations of the Orthodox bell-ringing in a very similar way to how they were set to music half a year later in Rimsky-Korsakov's eponymous work *Easter Overture*¹¹⁴. Rimsky-Korsakov described the Russian Orthodox bell-ringing he set to music as instrumental church dance music, which much corresponds with the character of the last movement of Rachmaninoff's Suite Op. 5. By 1893 Rachmaninoff was already well acquainted with Rimsky-Korsakov's *Svetlyy prazdnik* and in composing music with the same theme he also made use of the *paskhal'nyy* (Easter) liturgical lament *Khristos voskres* (Christ is Risen.)

When Rimsky-Korsakov first heard Rachmaninoff's Suite for Two Pianos, Op. 5 in January 1985, he commented on it with these words: "Everything is good, but at the end, when the melody of “Khristos voskres” comes in, it would be better to introduce it on its own first, and add the bells only the second time through.”¹¹⁵

However, Sergei Rachmaninoff (as he later recalled) shrugged his shoulders with a youthful self-confidence and answered: "And why so? After all, in real life, this theme always appears simultaneously with the sound of the bells!" – and he did not change a single note.¹¹⁶

While Rimsky-Korsakov's extensive work *Svetlyy prazdnik*, filled with numerous quotations from the psalms of the Gospel, presents a

¹¹⁴ Title in Russian: Svetlyy prazdnik.

¹¹⁵ Z. Apetyan, *Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove*, 221.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

detailed musical picture of the Easter service, in Rachmaninoff's musical plan, built on only four verses by A. S. Khomyakov, an ostinato dance bell melody figures as a motivic core, melodically more developed and tonally tenser.

Rachmaninoff's *Svetlyy prazdnik* (Easter movement) exploits two lines of musical development. The first is the transformation of the trichordal motif (G – A – Eb) with the striking interval of a tritone, which was part of the theme (the lamentation of the bell) in the third movement titled *Tears* (see Figure 10). The aforementioned moving rhythmic motif, introduced in high octaves, imitates the sound of the smallest belfry bells (*zazvonnye*) and creates the so-called bell-ringing of a small *trezvon* (see Figure 13).



Figure 13: Rachmaninoff – Suite for Two Pianos No. 1 op. 5, movement IV (first piano part)

The second line is based on the oscillating repetition of the dominant-seventh chord in first inversion (E-G-A-C#) and of the half-diminished seventh chord in second inversion (Eb-G-A-C), which alternate with the fifths (A-E) and (C-G) in the lower voices (see Figure 14). They imitate the strikes of the big bells so-called *blagovestniki*, with the motifs of the small *trezvon* bell-ringing above.



Figure 14: Rachmaninoff - Easter (op. 5), imitation of *blagovest* (second piano part)

The ostinato theme of the small trezvon gradually completely merges into the layers of the large trezvon. Pitches G and A, most frequently repeated in the first melodic theme of the small bells, are also present in the chordal structure of the second harmonic theme of the large bells. Later, however, they stand out as a separate ostinato theme in the middle voice, depicting the sound of medium melodic bells (*podzvonnnye*), while the ostinating seventh chords take over the role of the larger bells (*blagovestniki*). In two sections of the finale (before and after the middle episode of the movement which presents a choral arrangement of the liturgical chant *Khristos voskres*), Rachmaninoff masterfully depicts all the layers of the Orthodox bell-ringing.



Figure 15: Rachmaninoff – *Easter* (op. 5), the onset of the *podzvonnnye* in the second piano part (middle voice, pitches G-A)

Choral symphony *The Bells* op. 35 is considered to be Rachmaninoff's most important work due to its content. At the same time, it is considered the final and most complex culmination of the phenomenon of bells in the composer's life work. Rachmaninoff explains the context of composing this work with the following words:

The impetus for composing "The Bells" was unusual. In the previous summer, I sketched out the scheme of a symphony. Suddenly, one day I unexpectedly received an anonymous letter asking me to read Balmont's translation of a wonderful poem (The Bells) by Edgar Allan Poe, which is perfect for a musical setting and should particularly interest me. I read the poem attached to the letter and immediately decided to write a four-movement symphony based on

its verses. I worked on this composition with passionate fervor and it is my most favorite of all.¹¹⁷

The form and instrumentation was based on the content of the poem and the composer's intention to depict (according to the template) the life of a person through various types of bell-ringing. Setting a poem with a specific theme to music allowed Rachmaninoff to use his imagination in the context of implementing variants of his most favourite source of musical inspiration – the sonority of bells.

E. A. Poe's poem is divided into four stanzas, which allows for a certain analogy with the four-movement sonata form. The second movement *Lento* (wedding bell-ringing) can be understood as the slow movement of the sonata cycle, the third movement (nabat) as the scherzo dance movement, and Rachmaninoff himself found justification for the funeral finale (funeral bell) in Tchaikovsky's Symphony in B minor (*Pathetic*), which concluded with a mournful Adagio. Only the shortest movement of all, the dancelike character of the opening movement *Allegro ma non tanto* does not quite conform to the traditional sonata-allegro form. Rachmaninoff thus creates a certain modified cycle without the traditional allegro movement and with two differing scherzo movements.

The orchestration of *The Bells* is monumental. Rachmaninoff uses a great variety of musical instruments such as harp, celesta, piano, organ, a diverse section of percussion instruments, but also choir and vocal soloists: a tenor in the first movement, a dramatic soprano in the second movement, and a baritone in the finale.

In *The Bells op. 35* Rachmaninoff takes the listener on a journey through human life with its various chapters from carefree youth to death, each being associated with a different type of bell-ringing in the composition. The specific sonority gives every movement a different character, but all are characteristic for their independence and unity of mood without major internal contrasts.

The first movement, *Allegro ma non tanto*, moves forward very quickly compared to the other movements. Its musical progression, resembling the sound of a speeding sleigh (a typical troika), paints a picture of a peaceful youth full of joyful days and life's dreams. The predominance of the high register in the strings and woodwinds, together with the abundance of bell-ringing timbres and the almost complete absence of brass, lends a characteristic lightness to the orchestra's sound. The combination of the characteristic rhythmicity, the timbre of the flutes,

¹¹⁷ O. Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections*. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 170-171.

the soft tones of the celesta and the harmonies of the harp quite faithfully conveys the silvery color of the sub-arch bells and sleigh bells. Particularly noteworthy is the middle section of the first movement (*Meno mosso*), which presents a poetic image of dreaming. The lullaby theme recurs regularly in the various humming vocal parts (sung with closed mouth), doubled first in the horn and oboe part and then in pianissimo in the viola part. Against this backdrop, the harp, piano and con sordino trumpets bring in echoes of the bell-ringing of the church bells. Unexpectedly, motifs anticipating the mournful finale (the descending melodic line of the first violins in C sharp minor) begin to emerge towards the end of the work. The fast movement of the sleigh, imitated by the music, leads to a powerful but brief climax (*Meno mosso, Maestoso*), in which all the various timbres of the orchestra merge into a joyous and jubilant sounding trezvon.

The second movement, *Lento*, is filled with the bell-ringing of the wedding bells. Its main theme grows out of a short motif that appears to imitate the slow movement of the ringing bells in pianissimo. In the smoothly developing movement, the new features of the composer's compositional thought clearly stand out, with his characteristic sense of subtle nuance and impressions of musical mysticism and mystery. In the heavy bell strikes (blocked major seventh chords in third inversion on the downbeat, with a rhythmic figure of ostinating sixteenth-notes hovering above), one can detect a solemn, but also distinctly sombre character. The sense of free-flowing movement is enhanced by a constantly changing tonal plan with unexpected enharmonic relationships, chromatic dips in the melody, density of texture or the presence of multiple motivic lines. The long-coming, gradually receding climax at the end of the first section (the only place in the entire movement where a full *tutti* is heard) is developed into a dynamic diminution that spans throughout the middle section and the repetition. The repetition is heard in a much-abbreviated form and features again the bell-ringing of the church bells announcing the wedding. Together with the middle section, they give way in duration to the first section - the climax thus occurs at just about the point of the golden section.

In the third movement, *Presto*, the composer paints a picture of a catastrophe where all human dreams, hopes and expectations are shattered. This was typical of Russian art of the pre-revolutionary years, and expressed in various ways in the works of many authors. Rachmaninoff employs the strained bell-ringing of the nabat, initially heard only from a distance, but gradually approaching, accompanied by a powerful rumbling that grows in intensity. The expressiveness of this movement is extremely concentrated. The choral part lacks melodic

themes, with the chromatic progressions in the different voices changing into one solid powerful cry. The complex harmonic layers take on a purely sonic significance. The important attribute of harmony here is not the functional relationships between chords or the logic of the tonal plan, but the overall character and coloring of the larger sound complexes. A prime example is the structure of the musical material in the opening of the third movement, based on the repetition of a sequence of three chords - diminished VI (D-F-Ab), major IV (Bb-D-F) and minor I (F-Ab-C). Due to the speed of the alternation, the above chord sequence is aurally perceived as one complex harmonic unit - like the fluctuating mass of bell-ringing. Following this section, the organization of the musical material varies as different chordal structures are layered on top of each other or played simultaneously. On top of that, a sensitive note (E) is also added in the bass, which gives this complex a peculiar instability of sound. The same purely sonic effect is created in the tremolo strings in the low register, also progressing in repeating triads.

The last movement, *Lento lugubre*, is a mournful epilogue, a prayer over the sufferer who has fallen asleep forever. The funereal mood is created through the incessant bell-ringing of the funeral bell, imitated by the unchanging regular rhythm, harmonies with heavy and deep basses and the constantly repeated descending melody in the top voice. The finale reflects a sense of fear of death, but at the same time a kind of mockery of a man's fate, which Rachmaninoff expressed through a reminiscence of the dreaming theme from the first movement, presented in a distorted, parodic form. The *lento lugubre* is rounded off with an unusually fine ending in a major key. The singing lyrical theme in unison of violins, violas and cellos ascends to the high registers as if symbolizing the ascent of the departed soul to heaven.

Conclusion

The sonic characteristics of bells represent the most distinctive timbre aspect of art in cultures with an Orthodox bell-ringing tradition. The specific sound environment of everyday life in Orthodox towns and villages has been a source of inspiration for many authors. In particular, it has had a great influence on Russian composed music and has been interwoven into the content concept of many operatic and instrumental works by Russian composers.

The sound of bells has a special place in the works of Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff. Throughout his career, bells grew from an inspirational source into one of the most distinctive characteristic features of his unique style, and largely defined his compositional

thinking. The sonic aspect of bell-ringing penetrated the structure of the musical material and the compositional organisation of Rachmaninoff's works, and became an important building principle. This is particularly demonstrated in his small-form piano works, where the process of the formation of a new hierarchy of forming elements and the parallel process of innovation of the piano texture through the imitation of bell-ringing can be traced.

The aim of this paper was to draw attention to the phenomenon of bells in the works of Sergei Rachmaninoff and, above all, to add to the ongoing research, which has so far dealt with the issue only partially. The results may also inspire further research into other characteristic features of the composer's musical language, especially folk and church tunes, which are present in Rachmaninoff's works and can be analytically elaborated.

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