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Bells of Death: Rachmaninoff's Use of the Dies Irae in his Choral Symphony, Kolokola

Madeleine Lowrey

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Bells of Death: Rachmaninoff's Use of the Dies Irae in his Choral Symphony, *Kolokola*

By

Madeleine Lowrey

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Approved by

Chris Goertzen, Thesis Advisor
Professor of Musicology

Ellen Weinauer, Dean
Honors College

Richard Kravchak, Director
School of Music

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Abstract

This thesis investigates Sergei Rachmaninoff's use of a musical theme, the *Dies Irae* chant, in his choral symphony *Kolokola*. I briefly introduce the *Dies Irae* theme, then examine how Rachmaninoff uses it to unify his choral work. I consider textual themes found in Edgar Allan Poe's poems "The Bells" as well as how those themes are augmented in Konstantin Demetrievech Balmont's Russian re-imagining of Poe's poetry, the form set in *Kolokola*. The changes of the original poetry in the Russian translation are explored, with emphasis on how Rachmaninoff's use of the *Dies Irae* emphasizes how conceptions of death permeate Balmont's re-imagining of Poe's poetry.

Key Words: Sergei Rachmaninoff, Dies Irae, Edgar Allan Poe, Konstantin Dimitrievich Balmont, Kolokola, The Bells

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Introduction

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was a late Russian Romantic composer. He composed a multitude of instrumental and vocal works, which together constitute a significant part of Russian musical literature. He composed two major choral works. The first of these is *Vsenoschnoye Bdeniye* or *All-Night Vigil* (Op. 37), a setting of a Catholic Mass. In the second, he set a Russian translation of Edgar Allen Poe's (1809-1849) set of four linked poems entitled "The Bells".

Kolokola—Russian for "The Bells"—is a four-movement instrumental and choral work, with each of the movements a setting of one of the four poems. One notable feature of *Kolokola* is Rachmaninoff's use of the *Dies Irae* through most of the work. The *Dies Irae* is a hymn from the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass. Because of its historical association with Catholic funeral rites, the *Dies Irae* delivers connotations of death, destruction, and the supernatural to most of the compositions in which it is found. In Rachmaninoff's setting of Poe's poetry, the musical motif of the *Dies Irae* appears throughout the work, creating a musical focus on darker themes in the composition. However, in the original English form of "The Bells", only the last poem focuses on death. The set focuses on these themes in turn: birth, marriage, crisis, and finally death. For this reason, Rachmaninoff's wide-ranging use of the *Dies Irae* as a musical theme creates an apparent incongruence between the musical setting and the original text. If the poetry does not justify it, why would Rachmaninoff choose to use the *Dies Irae* so much? The answer lies in the Russian translation of Poe's poetry by Konstantin Demetreivich Balmont. In his translation, Balmont augments Poe's texts, adding references to death and the supernatural to the first three poems. It is this altered set of poems that Rachmaninoff uses for *Kolokola*.

Literature Review

Much has been written about both Edgar Allan Poe's poems "The Bells" and K. D. Balmont's Russian interpretation. Eric Carlson discusses "The Bells" in his *Companion to Poe Studies*. Carlson explores the themes present in Poe's set of poems, including Poe's focus on the stages of life. He provides an in-depth discussion of both literary elements and symbolism found in Poe's poetry.¹ Thomas Mabbot also discusses the meaning of the original English poems in his *Complete Poems*. Mabbot explores the metaphors present in the poems and the literary devices that Poe uses, such as alliteration.² In his article, "Rachmaninoff's *Kolokola* and the Change of Poetic Meaning in Translation", Andrew Kuster looks at the differences created in the poem by its translation into Russian. He takes a deeper look at the discrepancies between the Russian and English translations. He also explores the impact the poetry and translation have on performance practice, and in what language he believes the musical work is best performed.³ Martin Bidney also addresses Balmont's version of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry in his article "Fire and Water, Aspiration and Oblivion: Balmont's Re-Envisioning of Edgar Allan Poe." In this text, Bidney discusses major themes that Balmont inserts and extrapolates in his translations of Poe. He notes that the theme of oblivion is especially prominent in Balmont's interpretation of "The Bells".⁴

Several articles and books discuss Rachmaninoff's musical setting of *The Bells*. Norris refers to the *Kolokola* in passing, discussing compositional style and musical analysis. Robert

¹ Carlson, Eric W. *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996

² Mabbot, Thomas, ed. *Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Poems*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 429-440.

³ Kuster, Andrew Thomas. "Rachmaninoff's *Kolokola* and the Change of Poetic Meaning in Translation." *Choral Journal* 40, no. 8 (03, 2000): 39-42,

⁴ Bidney, Martin. "Fire and Water, Aspiration and Oblivion: Balmont's Re-Envisioning of Edgar Allan Poe." *Slavic and East European Journal* 35, no. 2 (1991): 193-213. Accessed January 1, 2016.

Threlfall's book goes into depth about the *Kolokola*'s structure. He talks about the forms of each of the four movements, as well as the keys in which they are written, in his book *A Catalogue of Compositions by S. Rachmaninoff*.⁵ S. J. Woodward wrote the only source to discuss this use of the *Dies Irae* in detail. In his dissertation, *The Dies Irae as Used by Sergei Rachmaninoff: Some Sources, Antecedents, and Applications* he briefly points out the employment of the theme in each of the four movements and argues that the *Dies Irae* theme acts as a unifying factor, but does not go into detail. He merely catalogues the uses of the *Dies Irae* across Rachmaninoff's major works.⁶

This thesis will add to the body of research concerning Rachmaninoff by exploring a specific facet of Rachmaninoff's choral piece *Kolokola* that has not previously been carefully addressed. By analyzing the *Dies Irae* tune's placement in the symphony and collecting research on Rachmaninoff's life and his previous symphonies, as well as analyzing Poe's poetry and Balmont's re-imagining, an increased understanding of the motif's role in the piece will be achieved.

The Dies Irae

The *Dies Irae* is a plainsong chant melody—originally in the genre called a “sequence”—that has been part of the Requiem Mass for centuries. The Requiem Mass is a Catholic Mass for the dead. Because of its ominous tune and its context within the Mass, the *Dies Irae* sequence carries with it a feeling of dread and despair. The title of the *Dies Irae* literally translates to “Day of Wrath”. The text is as follows:

⁵ Threlfall, Robert, and Geoffrey Norris. *A Catalogue of the Compositions of S. Rachmaninoff*. London: Scholar Press, 1982.

⁶ Woodard, S. J. (1984). *The Dies Irae as Used by Sergei Rachmaninoff: Some Sources, Antecedents, and Applications* (Order No. 8410355)

Dies irae, dies illa
 solvet saeculum in favilla,
 teste David cum Sibylla.

Quantus tremor est futurus,
 quando iudex est venturus
 cuncta stricte discussurus!

Tuba mirum spargens sonum
 per sepulcra regionum,
 coget omnes ante thronum.

Mors stupebit et natura,
 cum resurget creatura
 iudicanti responsura.

Liber scriptus proferetur,
 in quo totum continetur
 unde mundus iudicetur.

Iudex ergo cum sedebit,
 quicquid latet apparebit;
 nil inultum remanebit.

Day of wrath, day that
 will dissolve the world into burning coals,
 as David bore witness with the Sibyl.

How great a tremor is to be,
 when the judge is to come
 briskly shattering every grave.

A trumpet sounding an astonishing sound
 through the tombs of the region
 drives all men before the throne.

Death will be stunned and so will Nature,
 when arises man the creature
 responding to the One judging.

The written book will be brought forth,
 in which the whole record of evidence is
 contained
 whence the world is to be judged.

Therefore, when the Judge shall sit,
 whatever lay hidden will appear;
 nothing unavenged will remain.⁷

This text is extremely ominous. It speaks not only of death, but predicts the end of the world as we know it. It speaks of God returning “when the judge is to come” and the verdicts he will render on the both just and the unjust. The phrase “briskly shattering every grave” implies the end of the world as well as alluding to a world beyond this one. There is also an implication throughout the text that there is a thinness between the sacred and the profane. This poetry shapes the themes of darkness, death, and the supernatural that then are associated with the musical motif.

⁷ "Dies Irae." Dies Irae. Accessed March 30, 2016. https://www.franciscan-archive.org/de_celano/opera/diesirae.html.

The *Dies Irae* is a plainsong chant, meaning it is part of an overarching set of chants commonly used in the Catholic Church. The *Dies Irae* chant tune dates to 1250 C. E., when it was incorporated into the Requiem Mass. During this period, the Catholic Church did not want the music to distract from the text message. For this reason, chant consisted of one line of melody, unaccompanied by harmonies.⁸ The tune is strophic; rhythmic interpretations of it vary.



Figure 1. Dies Irae Chant Melody

This tune has been utilized by many composers from different musical eras to evoke themes of death, darkness, despair, and the supernatural. There are quotations of the *Dies Irae* tune in symphonies by Mozart, Berlioz, and Tchaikovsky. Robin Gregory states in his article that one of the functions of the *Dies Irae* in such settings is to evoke feelings associated with “the supernatural, with wicked powers, with witches, madness, bad dreams, and the lower elements of darkness”. The *Dies Irae* emphasizes the solemnity of death, or danger present in any given scenario.⁹ For example, Berlioz uses the theme in his *Symphony Fantastique* to accent the themes of the supernatural in the fifth movement. It is also used in more obviously sacred pieces, such as in Mozart’s *Requiem Mass*. Malcolm Boyd pursues this idea, stating that Romantic composers use the melody as a straightforward way to create eerie and solemn themes

⁸ John Caldwell and Malcolm Boyd. "Dies Irae." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* Oxford University Press

⁹ Robin Gregory. 1953. "Dies Irae". *Music & Letters* 34 (2). Oxford University Press: 133–39.

of death.¹⁰ Rachmaninoff uses this unsettling and foreboding motif throughout his choral symphony *Kolokola*, seemingly without regard to Poe's original text.

Edgar Allan Poe's Poems

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was an American writer of prose and poetry of the nineteenth century. He was famous for poems such as "The Raven" and "Annabelle Lee" as well as for horror short stories such as "The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Pit and the Pendulum", and "The Murder at the Rue Morgue". Poe's writing often explores themes of death, despair, mystery, and woe. For instance, "Annabelle Lee" is about a deceased lover, and "The Tell-Tale Heart" concerns a man struggling with guilt after committing a murder. The tone of most of Poe's work is grim, meaning it would be unsurprisingly if "The Bells" would be similarly focused on death and despair.

However, Poe's "The Bells" is one of the few of his works that is not overtly centered on oblivion. "The Bells" is a set of four poems, published in 1849 (soon after Poe's death), which follows four different stages of life—birth, marriage, crisis, and death. The first of the four poems is titled "The Silver Bells". It centers on birth and the jubilations of life, opening with the words "Hear the sledges of the bells". The bells in this poem are described as silver, and represent the newness of life. The "world of merriment" that the bells "foretell" offers a sense of hope and light. Poe also uses the onomatopoeic "tinkle, tinkle, tinkle" to continue this feeling of hope throughout the short poem. In short, these bells create an ambience of wonder at the newness of life.

¹⁰ Malcolm Boyd. 1968. "dies Irae': Some Recent Manifestations". *Music & Letters* 49 (4). Oxford University Press: 348

“Hear the sledges of the bells
 Silver Bells!
 What a world of merriment their melody foretells!
 How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
 In the icy air of night!
 While the stars that oversprinkle
 All the heavens, seem to twinkle
 With a crystalline delight;
 In a sort of runic rhyme,
 To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells
 From the bells, bells, bells, bells
 Bells, bells, bells
 From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.”¹¹

One of the key elements in “The Bells” is the use of repetition and onomatopoeia. For example, in the section above Poe insistently repeats the words “bells” and “time”. This rhythmic element in Poe’s poetry mimics the rhythm of a bell tolling.

The second of the poems is titled “The Wedding Bells”. It is also jubilant in nature and celebrates an early milestone in life, marriage. It begins in a fashion similar to the first verse. However, these bells are more “mellow”. They are golden, like wedding bands, and, while this poem is also hopeful, it implies a more lasting, passionate joy. With words like “rapture” and “molten-golden notes” this poem invokes a greater maturity. Again, Poe utilizes repeats the word bells many times.

“Hear the mellow wedding bells
 Golden bells!
 What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!
 Through the balmy air of night
 How they ring out their delight!

¹¹ Mabbot, Thomas, ed. Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Poems. Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 429-440.

“From the molten-golden notes,
 And all in tune,
 What a liquid ditty floats
 To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats
 On the moon!
 Oh, from out the sounding cells,
 What a gush of euphony voluminously wells !
 How it swells
 How it dwells
 On the Future! how it tells
 Of the rapture that impels
 To the swinging and the ringing
 Of the bells, bells, bells,
 Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
 bells, bells, bells
 To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!”¹²

Neither of these verses make any reference to death. In fact, both poems look hopefully into the future. The last two poems in Poe’s set have a more serious tone. “The Alarum Bells” focuses on turbulent themes of distress. The middle stanzas are especially foreboding, speaking of the “horror they outpour”. The noises the bells make are “clang, and clash, and roar,” in marked contrast to the tinkling bells mentioned in the “Silver Bells”. These bells are “brazen” and they “shriek” instead of ring. They warn of imminent peril with lines like “How the danger ebbs and flows; Yet, the ear distinctly tells”. The bells are made of brass, and the sounds in the verse are harsher than the sounds repeated in previous sections of the poem. With words such as “roar” and “clang”, Poe creates a serious, foreboding atmosphere.

“Hear the loud alarum bells
 Brazen bells!
 What tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!
 In the startled ear of night
 How they scream out their affright!

¹² Mabbot, Thomas, ed. Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Poems. Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 429-440.

Too much horrified to speak,
 They can only shriek, shriek,
 Out of tune,
 In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,
 In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire,
 Leaping higher, higher, higher,
 With a desperate desire,
 And a resolute endeavor
 Now, now to sit or never,
 By the side of the pale-faced moon.
 Oh, the bells, bells, bells!
 What a tale their terror tells
 Of Despair!
 How they clang, and clash, and roar!
 What a horror they outpour
 On the bosom of the palpitating air!
 Yet the ear, it fully knows,
 By the twanging,
 And the clanging,
 How the danger ebbs and flows;
 Yet, the ear distinctly tells,
 In the jangling,
 And the wrangling,
 How the danger sinks and swells,
 By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells
 Of the bells
 Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
 Bells, bells, bells
 In the clamour and the clangour of the bells!"¹³

This verse deals with crisis. “The Alarum Bells” address a stage of life that is full of calamity. Rachmaninoff’s use of the *Dies Irae* makes more sense in this verse because the poem’s destructive nature matches more closely the turbulent nature of the *Dies Irae*. The last of the four poems focuses completely on death. The title is “The Death Bells”, and it ends the set on a much more solemn note than it began. The middle stanza embodies the mood of this poem

¹³ Mabbot, Thomas, ed. Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Poems. Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 429-440.

with words such as “monody” and “shiver”. The bells in this poem are iron, that material implying a significantly more solemn tone. The onomatopoeic elements are the tolling of the bells, a phrase that is repeated throughout the poem.

“Hear the tolling of the bells
Iron bells!
What a world of solemn thought their monody compels!
In the silence of the night,
How we shiver with affright
At the melancholy meaning of their tone!
For every sound that floats
From the rust within their throats
Is a groan.
And the people, ah, the people
They that dwell up in the steeple,
All alone,
And who, tolling, tolling, tolling,
In that muffled monotone,
Feel a glory in so rolling
On the human heart a stone
They are neither man nor woman
They are neither brute nor human
They are Ghouls:
And their king it is who tolls;
And he rolls, rolls, rolls, rolls,
Rolls
A pæan from the bells!
And his merry bosom swells
With the pæan of the bells!
And he dances, and he yells;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the pæan of the bells
Of the bells:
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the throbbing of the bells
Of the bells, bells, bells
To the sobbing of the bells;
Keeping time, time, time,
As he knells, knells, knells,
In a happy Runic rhyme,
To the rolling of the bells,
Of the bells, bells, bells,

To the tolling of the bells,
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells,
To the moaning and the groaning of the bells.”¹⁴

These last two verses poems have a much darker tone than the first two in Poe’s original poem. The “Death Bells” focuses on death and the supernatural, referencing ghouls and “runic rhymes”. Rachmaninoff employs the tune the *Dies Irae* in setting these last two verses in a way that accentuates these themes.

Balmont’s Re-Imagining of the Poetry

The Bells as originally written by Edgar Allan Poe features different kinds of bells painting contrasting moods. Each bell is of a different metal and relates to different stages of life. “The Silver Bells” announce birth, “The Wedding Bells” ornament a wedding, “The Alarm Bells” paint distress, and “The Death Bells” naturally illustrate the end of life. Except for the last poem, death is not originally a part of these verses.¹⁵ However, Rachmaninoff utilizes the *Dies Irae* theme throughout, which at first glance seems wrong. However, the poetry that Rachmaninoff set to music is not entirely Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry. It is instead a re-imagining of Poe’s poems in Russian by Konstantin Dimitreivich Balmont. This version significantly darkens the overall tone of the poems.

K. D. Balmont, born in 1867, was a Russian symbolist poet and a contemporary of Rachmaninoff. He was known for his rash and impressionistic literary style.¹⁶ Russian

¹⁴ Mabbot, Thomas, ed. Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Poems. Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 429-440.

¹⁵ Carlson, Eric W. *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996.

¹⁶ Wenning, Elizabeth. "Konstantin (Dmitriyevich) Balmont." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2003

symbolism was a movement in literature, music, and art that revolted against the realism movement. The poets used symbols to create atmosphere and express overarching emotions rather than narrating realistic pictures. This is immediately apparent in how Balmont chooses to interpret Poe's poetry. He responds considerably to Poe's usual themes, doing so by adding ominous references to the initial verses of "The Bells". Balmont was also part of the Acmeism movement; a movement referring to things more solid than the symbolist movement.¹⁷ These schools of thought impact Balmont's interpretations of Poe's poetry. In short, Balmont recast the poems to sound more like "normal" Poe rather than creating a word for word translation. He took massive liberties with the poem, especially involving imagery. He did, however, retain the repetitive and onomatopoeic elements of Poe's poetry, remaining true to that aspect of the feel of the poem.¹⁸

"Listen, hear the silver bells!
 Silver bells!
 How they charm our weary senses with a sweetness that
 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 deaths beyond all number,
 Waits a 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 ringing that dreamless peace foretells."¹⁹

¹⁷ Bidney, Martin. "Fire and Water, Aspiration and Oblivion: Balmont's Re-Envisioning of Edgar Allan Poe." *Slavic and East European Journal* 35, no. 2 (1991): 193-213. Accessed January 1, 2015.

¹⁸ Carlson, Eric W. *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. 506

¹⁹ Balmont, Konstantin, Copland, Fanny. 1920. *The Bells*, Op. 35. Boosey and Hawkes. Retrieved April 7, 2015, from Music Online: Classical Scores Library, Volume I.

Balmont's re-imagining thus adds imagery to Poe's poems. He inserts words such as "oblivion" and phrases such as "waits a universal slumber-deep and sweet past all compare," adding an ominous shade to the bells that signify the beginning of life. A re-translation shows that Balmont does this while retaining a great deal of the repetitive and onomatopoeic elements originally found in Poe's work.

"With their singing and their jingling
they tell of oblivion.
Oh, how clearly, clearly, clearly,
like the ringing laughter of a child."²⁰

In the second poem, Balmont utilized fewer onomatopoeic elements and less repetition. He created his own rhythm within the poem, but still used some words such as "ringing sounds" and "beckoning" to stay true to the original poetry.

"Through the tranquil night air
it is like someone's eyes
glowing
and through the waves of ringing
sounds
gazing at the moon.
From beckoning, wondrous cells
filled with fairy-tale delights,
soaring and falling"²¹

A similar process can be observed in Balmont's re-interpretations of all four poems in the set. In the below excerpts, Balmont adds images including "amber twilight" to add a more

²⁰ Robinson, Harlow. The Kristin and Roger Servison Concert. Program Notes for Rachmaninoff, *Kolokola*. Tanglewood Orchestra. 2012

²¹ Robinson, Harlow. The Kristin and Roger Servison Concert. Program Notes for Rachmaninoff, *Kolokola*. Tanglewood Orchestra. 2012

colorful palate, while using words like “calling” and “chiming” to retain some of the ringing of Poe’s poetry.

From the sounding wells up winging
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!

-Balmont²²

What a gush of euphony voluminously wells!
How it swells!
How it dwells
On the Future! how it tells
Of the rapture that impels
To the swinging and the ringing
Of the bells, bells, bells,
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells
To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!

-Poe²³

. With colorful imagery like “Rising, falling, brightly calling; from a thousand happy throats” Balmont continues to add metaphors and imagery, thus transforming the original poetry.

Of special significance here, he added numerous references to death not initially found in Poe’s poetry.²⁴ Again, it is important to note that these themes are consistent with much of Poe’s literature, just not with this set of poems. The line “Else I die of my desire in aspiring to the moon” borders life with its end. Balmont chooses to utilize the theme of death as a unifying theme throughout the four poems, joining the four stages of life.

It is in the first two poems that Balmont most extensively alters the themes. Poe’s first poem, “The silver bells” is extremely jovial. Balmont interprets it differently, adding lines such as “In the ringing and the singing that of deep oblivion tells”. While these lines refer to death in

²² Balmont, Konstantin, Copland, Fanny. 1920. *The Bells*, Op. 35. Boosey and Hawkes. Retrieved April 7, 2015, from Music Online: Classical Scores Library, Volume I.

²³ Carlson, Eric W. *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. 506

²⁴ Norman, Will. *Transitional Nabokov*. Oxford: Lang, 2009.213

a joyful way, coupling it with birth, this is still a reference that was not originally present.

Balmont also repeats themes of nighttime, moonlight, and twilight. In the first poem this is present in the lines “On the icy midnight air” and the reference to “universal slumber”.

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 the promise they declare,
 That beyond illusion’s cumber
 Births and lives beyond all number,
 Waits a universal slumber-deep and sweet
 past all compare

-Balmont²⁵

Hear the sledges with the bells --
 Silver bells!
 What a world of merriment their melody
 foretells!
 How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
 In the icy air of night!
 While the stars that oversprinkle
 All the heavens, seem to twinkle
 With a crystalline delight;
 Keeping time, time, time,
 In a sort of Runic rhyme,
 To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells

-Poe²⁶

In the second poem, “The Wedding Bells”, Balmont does not specifically bring up death. He rather uses imagery to create a more mellow and mysterious tone with phrases like “And amber twilight gloats” and “Like a lover’s yearning glances”. This verse’s reinterpretation stays closest to Poe’s original poetry, only removing some of the repetitive elements. Balmont’s version draws out themes of night time and darkness with phrases like “On a wave of tuneful rapture to the moon” and “an amber twilight gloats”.

What a world of tender passion their
 melodious voice foretells!
 Through the night their sound entrances,
 Like a lovers yearning glances,
 That arise

What a world of happiness their harmony
 foretells!
 Through the balmy air of night
 How they ring out their delight!
 From the molten-golden notes,

²⁵ Balmont, Konstantin, Copland, Fanny. 1920. *The Bells*, Op. 35. Boosey and Hawkes. Retrieved April 7, 2015, from Music Online: Classical Scores Library, Volume I.

²⁶ Carlson, Eric W. *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press,

On a wave of tuneful rapture to the moon
 within the skies
 From the sounding wells 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

-Balmont²⁷

And all in tune,
 What a liquid ditty floats
 To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats
 On the moon!
 Oh, from out the sounding cells,
 What a gush of euphony voluminously wells!
 How it swells!
 How it dwells

-Poe²⁸

The third poem, “The Alarum Bells”, also illustrates Balmont’s inclinations in emphasizing themes. The moon theme appears again in the poem, as the poet “aspires towards the moon” and a darker overtone is taken when Balmont decides to repeat the word “Despair” instead of the word “bells”.

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”

-Balmont ²⁹

Leaping higher, higher, higher
 With a desperate desire,
 And a resolute endeavor
 Now, now to sit or never,
 By the side of the pale-faced moon.
 Oh, the bells, bells, bells
 What a tale their terror tells
 Of Despair!

-Poe³⁰

Balmont also retains some of the onomatopoeic elements in the third poem, though not as vigorously as had Poe.

²⁷ Balmont, Konstantin, Copland, Fanny. 1920. *The Bells*, Op. 35. Boosey and Hawkes. Retrieved April 7, 2015, from Music Online: Classical Scores Library, Volume I.

²⁸ Carlson, Eric W. *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press,

²⁹ Balmont, Konstantin, Copland, Fanny. 1920. *The Bells*, Op. 35. Boosey and Hawkes. Retrieved April 7, 2015, from Music Online: Classical Scores Library, Volume I.

³⁰ Mabbot, Thomas, ed. *Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Poems*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 429

“Hear,
 hear the howling of the alarm bell
 like the groaning of a brazen hell.
 These sounds in wild torment
 keep repeating a tale of horror”³¹

The final poem, which was already dark, is “The Death Bells”. In this poem, Balmont takes Poe’s already dark images and makes them yet darker. The phrase “Bitter end to fruitless dreaming their stern monody foretells” aptly illustrates this point. Balmont’s version is not merely focused on death, it is obsessed with it.

“Hear the tolling of the bells
 Mournful bells
 Bitter end to fruitless dreaming their stern
 monody foretells
 What a world of desolation in their iron
 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”
 -Balmont³²

“Hear the tolling of the bells
 Iron bells!
 What a world of solemn thought their monody
 compels!
 In the silence of the night,
 How we shiver with affright
 At the melancholy meaning of their tone!
 For every sound that floats
 From the rust within their throats
 Is a groan.
 And the people -- ah, the people
 They that dwell up in the steeple,
 All alone,
 And who, tolling, tolling, tolling,
 In that muffled monotone,
 Feel a glory in so rolling
 On the human heart a stone”
 -Poe³³

The reviews of Balmont’s body of work by his contemporaries are quit mixed. Balmont was often praised less for his literal translations than for his ability to understand the overarching

³¹ Robinson, Harlow. The Kristin and Roger Servison Concert. Program Notes for Rachmaninoff, *Kolokolka*. Tanglewood Orchestra. 2012

³² Balmont, Konstantin, Copland, Fanny. 1920. The Bells, Op. 35. Boosey and Hawkes. Retrieved April 7, 2015, from Music Online: Classical Scores Library, Volume I.

³³ Carlson, Eric W. *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press,

feeling that he thought the original writer was trying to convey. Oleg A. Maslenikov described Balmont's translation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* as "more sinister than the original".³⁴ Eric Carlson describes Balmont's translations of Poe's poems as "trailblazing musical development".³⁵ This indicates that while Balmont changes things about Poe's poetry, his re-imagining enhances rather than lessens opportunities to set the poetry in music.

Balmont was also criticized for the liberties he took. Many reviewers claimed that, especially with American literature, Balmont changed large sections of the works he translated, making the pieces entirely his own rather than merely reinterpreted. This is especially apparent in the liberties Balmont took with Poe's poetry. His changes certainly help explain the decisions that Rachmaninoff made in setting the poetry. Indeed, the changes that Balmont made are what caught Rachmaninoff's eye. The Russian translation of the poems were specifically recommended by a friend for their heavy imagery and consistent themes.³⁶

Rachmaninoff only knew Balmont's version of "The Bells". The work was introduced to him by a pen pal in 1913 because he was indeed interested in bells. His writing this piece reflects a connection to the themes as recast by Balmont in addition to his own fascination with bells.³⁷

³⁴ Wenning, Elizabeth. "Konstantin (Dmitriyevich) Balmont." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2003

³⁵ Carlson, Eric W. *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996.

³⁶ Steinberg, Michael. *Choral Masterworks: A Listener's Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pg. 240. Rachmaninoff had a pen pal in Russia who recommended the poetry to him.

³⁷ Steinberg, Michael. *Choral Masterworks: A Listener's Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Musical Analysis

One way that Rachmaninoff directly illustrates the poetry is by using bell motifs and the *Dies Irae* throughout the piece. His love of bells shines through in how he creates bell sounds in many ways, often without using actual bells. The first movement is in a loose rondo form. There are two main themes that repeat in the movement, in addition to an introduction, a closing, and transition sections. Bell sounds appear immediately in the flute section in the first movement. These sounds open the piece in a jubilant fashion, celebrating the birth that the poetry portrays.

Bell sounds open the piece. The first of these are created in the flute section, and emphasized with triangle and harp. The sounds of these three instruments, stacked on top of each other in measures 1 through 6, create a light tinkly sound. The flute is the main bell sound, accelerating rhythmically through measure 6, leading off by creating a sense of urgency. The bell sounds announce the movement in the same manner as church bells mark the opening of a Catholic Mass. This idea is repeated in every movement of the piece, adding sacred to profane themes.

The image displays a musical score for three instruments: Flute 1, Flute 2, and Oboe. The score is written in a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and a common time signature (C). The Flute 1 part begins with a series of sixteenth-note chords, creating a light tinkly sound. The Flute 2 part is mostly silent, with a few notes in the final measure. The Oboe part is also mostly silent, with a few notes in the final measure. The score is divided into measures 1 through 6, with a vertical line indicating the end of the first measure.

The image shows a musical score for three woodwind instruments: Flute 1 (Fl. 1), Flute 2 (Fl. 2), and Oboe (Ob.). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). Fl. 1 plays a series of chords, mostly triads, in a rhythmic pattern. Fl. 2 is silent. Ob. plays a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, with some notes highlighted in red.

Figure 2. Movement I Bells Example I

The celesta picks up the bell sounds from there, combining with the flute in measure 14. This kind of instrumentation permeates the first movement, giving Rachmaninoff the freedom to create unity through bell sounds while retaining all options to fully utilize the orchestra.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The top staff shows chords and the bottom staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes.

Figure 3. Movement I Bells Example II

Rachmaninoff's first use of the *Dies Irae* theme is in movement one, measure 28 in the trumpet section. This lies between the opening section of the movement and the first theme of the movement, and directly follows bell sounds in measures 24 through 26, thus linking bell sounds and the *Dies Irae*. The bells similarly line up with the words "hear the bells" in measures

95 through 98. Both Rachmaninoff's usage of bell sounds and the *Dies Irae* emphasize specific sections of the poetry.

Throughout the first movement, bell tunes illustrate appropriate lines of the poetry. The soloist enters in measure 62 on the word "Hear". This entrance lines up with spurt of bell sounds in the celesta, also in measure 62. The bells aptly accent the poetry.

The first theme of movement one is light and perky. The theme emphasizes happier elements of the poetry. The second theme, which is a variation of the latter half of the *Dies Irae* chant, is much darker. This usage of the *Dies Irae* as a main theme contrasts significantly with the first theme. It appears as a sort of round in the choral section of the movement. It is a slower and sadder than the first theme. This adds a melancholy tint to an otherwise happy movement.

Rachmaninoff's usage of the *Dies Irae* in measures 106 through 117 also lines up with both bell sounds and with significant sections in the poetry. Although the chorus is not singing words directly suiting the *Dies Irae* theme, the words leading up to the introduction of the theme in measures 95 through 105 are "of how days of delusion will be followed by renewal, the delight of tender sleep". These words, found in the tenor solo, do allude to death, as does the *Dies Irae*'s sudden and significant presence. The *Dies Irae* becomes the core of this work. It unifies the piece, reappearing in both the second and third movements as central ingredients. This particular insertion of the *Dies Irae* adds an idea of looming death even at the beginning of life—death is always present.

The image displays two musical staves for vocal parts. The top staff is labeled 'Soprano' and contains four measures of whole rests. The second staff is labeled 'Alto' and contains four measures of music: the first two measures are quarter notes (F4, G4, A4, B4), and the last two are eighth notes (F4, G4, A4, B4). The third staff is labeled 'Tenor' and contains four measures: the first two are whole rests, and the last two are quarter notes (F3, G3, A3, B3). The bottom staff is labeled 'Bass' and contains four measures of whole rests. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 4/4.

The bottom image shows a more detailed musical score for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The Soprano part has four measures: the first two are quarter notes (F4, G4, A4, B4), and the last two are whole rests. The Alto part has four measures: the first two are quarter notes (F4, G4, A4, B4), and the last two are whole rests. The Tenor part has four measures: the first two are quarter notes (F3, G3, A3, B3), and the last two are whole rests. The Bass part has four measures: the first two are whole rests, and the last two are quarter notes (F3, G3, A3, B3). The key signature has three flats and the time signature is 4/4.

Figure 4 Movement I *Dies Irae* Example 1

Rachmaninoff uses the *Dies Irae* theme in conjunction with the bell sounds of the celesta in measures 107 through 112. The chorus parts leading up to this use of the bells are singing the text “Hear the bells”. The first movement ends the same way that it opens, with bell sounds in the flute, harp, and triangle.

The second movement, The Wedding Bells, is less cheerful than the first movement. The *Dies Irae* is immediately apparent in this movement as a transition between major themes. It first appears at the very opening of the movement, in measures 1 through 5, linking the first and second movements. The first half of the *Dies Irae* theme is found in the viola, conspicuously not echoing the main theme found in the first movement. This continual use of the *Dies Irae* theme in its many forms emphasizes its importance in the piece. There appears to be little connection between when the *Dies Irae* appears in this movement and specific moments in the text. The theme acts, instead, as a transitional motif that ties the entire movement together. However, the *Dies Irae* does line up with bell sounds throughout the movement.

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Viola' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Vla.'. Both staves are in the key of D major (two sharps) and 9/8 time. The top staff features a melodic line with a series of eighth notes and quarter notes, with red curved lines above it indicating phrasing. The bottom staff shows a more rhythmic accompaniment with eighth and sixteenth notes, including some beamed patterns.

Figure 5 Movement II *Dies Irae* Example 1

Rachmaninoff creates bell sounds in movement two, again not with actual bells, but now in the harp. The harp opens the piece—much as did the flutes in the first movement—and runs from measures 1 through 7, again opening the movement like the beginning of a Mass. The bells also line up with the opening *Dies Irae* melody. The harp is chosen in order to create warmer “golden” bell sounds. This mellow sound creates the perfect atmosphere for the wedding bells. As in the first movement, the bells are percussive.



Figure 6 Movement II Bells Example 1

The harp is used throughout movement two in a similar fashion. In measures 42 through 47 the harp reappears, lining up with the words “hear the mellow wedding bells, golden bells”. The harp emphasizes the text in this segment. This occurs again in measures 64 through 67, in measures 76 through 77, and at multiple other points throughout the movement. While the *Dies Irae* does not strongly align with the poetry in movement two, the bell sounds do, quite emphatically.

The bells in movement three are played on the harp as well. Movement three opens with bells, as did the first movement. Indeed, Rachmaninoff opens all four movements with ringing bell sounds. This opening sequence connects the movements independent of the linkage made by the recurrence of the *Dies Irae* theme. The harp’s bell sounds reach from measure 1 through measure 10.

The musical score for Harp in Movement III Bells Example I is written in 3/4 time. The right hand plays a sequence of four chords, each consisting of a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, with the notes stacked vertically. The left hand has rests in the first three measures and a single chord in the fourth measure.

Figure 7. Movement III Bells Example I

These bell sounds become more prominent, and are stacked as movement three progresses. The more frenzied the movement becomes, the more clamorous the bells are. This movement is called “The Alarum Bells”, and this is well illustrated in the orchestration of the bells. In measures 16 through 22 this stacking effect begins, and this continues throughout the piece.

The musical score for Movement III Bells Example II involves four instruments: Bassoon 1, Bassoon 2, Harp, and Piano. All are in 3/4 time. Bassoon 1 and Bassoon 2 play dotted quarter notes. The Harp part features stacked chords in the right hand and chords in the left hand. The Piano part has a simple melodic line in the right hand and rests in the left hand.

Figure 7 Movement III Bells Example II

In measure 47 the bell sounds—found at this point in the tambourine—line up with the choral text “Hear the brazen bells”. Another instance of the text and the bells lining up is in measure 159, where the words “so desperate every shriek” are sung at the same time that Rachmaninoff uses the flute, oboe, english horn, and clarinet to create rapid bell sounds.

The *Dies Irae* is also frenzied throughout the movement. It appears between choral sections, usually in a lower instrument, such as in the bass clarinet. This further darkens the already ominous *Dies Irae* theme. Within movement three, Rachmaninoff first uses the theme in measure 104. Prior to this occurrence of the *Dies Irae*, the chorus mournfully sings the words “keep repeating the tale of horror as though begging for help”. The text and the *Dies Irae* melody seem to connect especially strongly in this moment in the most tumultuous movement of *Kolokola*.



Figure 8 Movement III *Dies Irae* Example I

This *Dies Irae* motif appears again in movement three in measures 161 through 167, where the motif both lines up with the words “shriek” in the chorus part and with rapid repetitive stacked bell sounds of the flute, oboe, English horn, and clarinet. Rachmaninoff uses the *Dies Irae* to accent some of the harsher words in Balmont’s text.

Surprisingly, the *Dies Irae* is entirely absent from the last movement. A new theme takes its place. This suggests a sort of rebirth with death; the renewal that Balmont’s text alludes to. The bell sounds remain, however. Death is painted as a resolution, now rather calm.



Figure 9 Movement IV Theme Example

As in the first three movements, Rachmaninoff opens movement four with tolling bells. These bells are found, again, in the harp and “ring” from measures 1 through 7. Each set of bells acts as an announcement. The harp acts as one set of bells that repeats throughout the movement. The celesta and piano act as the alternative set of bells here. Rachmaninoff uses those instruments to create more chaotic bells in measures 55 through 58, following the text of “muffled tones” in the chorus. As in the other three movements, the bells and the poetry reinforce each other.

Conclusion

The *Dies Irae*, which is part of the Catholic Requiem Mass, is found here and there through most of Rachmaninoff’s choral work *Kolokola*. At first glance, Rachmaninoff’s regular use of the *Dies Irae* seems inconsistent with the progress of Poe’s text. While Poe’s poetry follows four stages of life, without a significant focus on death until the last poem in the set, Rachmaninoff’s setting responds to reminders of death throughout.

Rachmaninoff, however, did not set Poe’s poetry as originally published, but rather a Russian re-imagining of that poetry by Russian poet K. D. Balmont. Balmont augmented Poe’s poetry, distributing allusions to death through all four poems of the set. Rachmaninoff’s use of

the *Dies Irae* reinforces how these reminders pepper Balmont's version, helping solidify the broad sweep of the themes of death and the supernatural throughout the work.

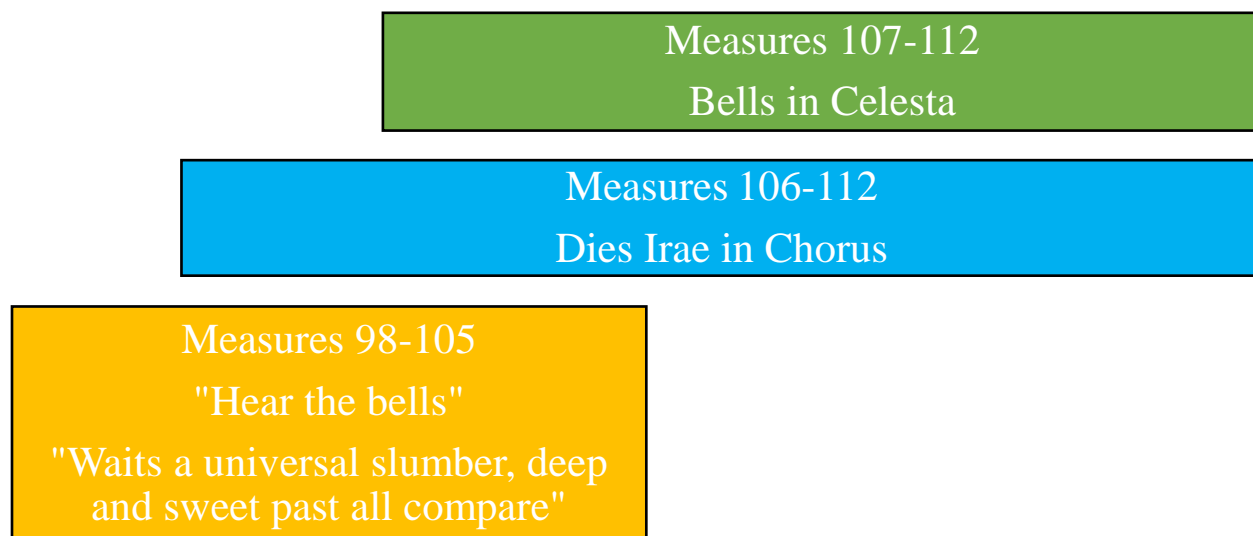


Figure 10. Score Comparison One

Rachmaninoff uses the text, bells, and the *Dies Irae* motif in *Kolokola* to make a cohesive sonic work, creating an arc peaking in movement three. In Movement I, which presents the birth bells, Rachmaninoff adds the *Dies Irae* and the bells sounds to color the text “Waits a universal slumber, deep and sweet past all compare” and “Hear the bells”. The bells sounds found in the tambourine reinforce the *Dies Irae* melody. Indeed, in this moment, all the different major elements of the piece line up.

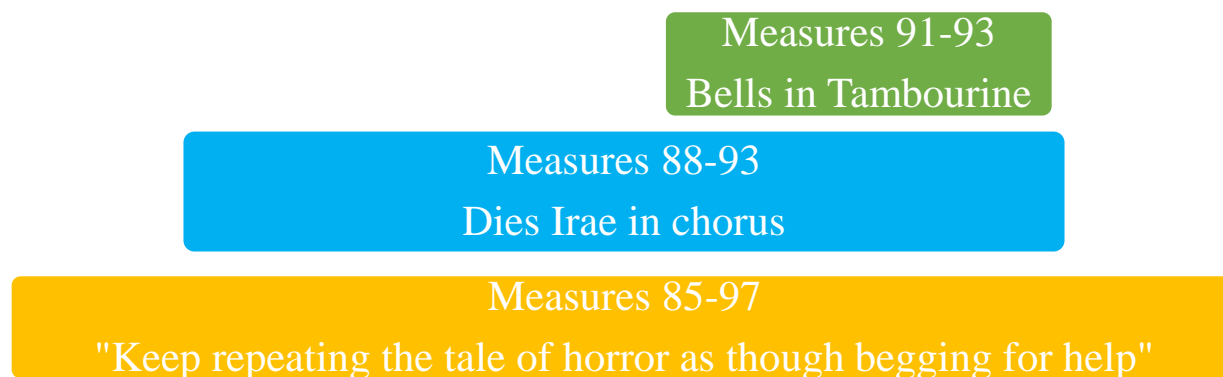


Figure 11. Score Comparison Two

Such a stacking of elements occurs again in the third movement, where the words “Keep repeating the tale of horror as though begging for help”, the *Dies Irae* theme—found in the chorus—and the bell sounds found in the tambourine all align. Rachmaninoff connects Balmont’s themes of death, hope, an afterlife, and judgment by interconnecting the idea of bells with the textual and musical elements of the *Dies Irae*. The bell sounds in *Kolokola* offer a metaphor emphasized by the *Dies Irae*. Thus, Rachmaninoff uses bell sounds and the *Dies Irae* to create an atmosphere appropriate for Balmont’s text, and brings out the imagery Balmont added to Poe’s text. The two motifs run as a theme throughout the movement, again creating a dramatic arc. They add depth to the work and provide unity in a very deliberate manner.

Balmont’s re-translations of Poe’s original poems are critical to how Rachmaninoff shapes *Kolokola*. The amount of the *Dies Irae*’s involvement in each movement also creates a sort of arc. Rachmaninoff emphasizes the *Dies Irae* as a main theme in the first movement. The importance of the motif builds up to the fourth movement, then the *Dies Irae* is entirely absent in that movement, indicating that death is a sort of rest. The bell sounds open each movement, just as bells announce a mass. The *Dies Irae* and the bells combine with Balmont’s words to unify

this cohesive, dramatic, and deeply emotional piece, highlighting its religious and hopeful essence.

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