

Notes for Classics 5: Dvořák & Rachmaninoff

Saturday, January 19 and Sunday, January 20

Eckart Preu, conductor — Mateusz Wolski, violin — Spokane Symphony Chorale

- Miguel del Águila – *Chautauquan Summer Overture*
- Antonin Dvořák – *Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 53*
- Sergei Rachmaninoff – *The Bells, Op. 35*

Miguel del Águila

Chautauquan Summer Overture

THE VITAL STATS

Composer: born September 5, 1957, Montevideo, Uruguay

Work composed: commissioned by the Chautauqua Institution in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra.

World premiere: Uriel Segal led the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra on July 3, 2004, at the Chautauqua Institution Summer Festival in Chautauqua, New York

Instrumentation: 3 flutes, 3 oboes, 3 clarinets, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, bird whistle filled with water, crash cymbals, cuckoo whistle, glockenspiel, gun shot, metal wind chimes, police whistle, snare drum, suspended cymbals, tambourine, tam-tam, triangle, wind machine, harp, and strings.

Estimated duration: 13 minutes

Three-time Grammy nominated American composer Miguel del Águila has established himself as one of the most distinctive composers of his generation. del Águila's music, hailed by the *New York Times* as "elegant and affectionate ... with genuine wit," combines drama and propulsive rhythms with nostalgic nods to his South American roots. Numerous orchestras, ensembles, and soloists around the world have performed del Águila's music, which has been featured on more than 30 CDs from several different recording labels, including Naxos, Telarc, and Albany.

"*Chautauquan Summer*, a work that portrays the moods and changing landscape around Chautauqua Lake, NY, from autumn to summer, was conceived as a short concert opener (or closer)," del Águila writes. "All its imagery stems from my memories and experiences during the three years I spent as resident composer of the Chautauqua Institution Summer Festival. As the work begins, it is late fall and a cold wind blows over the almost frozen Chautauqua Lake, announcing a long cold winter. Most of the work conveys the barrenness and isolation of this winter. Towards the end of the piece, spring and finally summer arrive.

"Two motifs are heard constantly throughout the piece. First introduced in a darker, mysterious mood by the horns and double basses, the themes are transformed into a lyrical, nostalgic tango played by a clarinet in the middle 'winter' section. After more dramatic turbulence, the main theme returns ... slowly transformed into humorous, carefree carousel music with an ever-increasing circus-like street-fair character, which announces the upcoming summer and festival. All residents, flora and fauna, awaken or return to

Chautauqua Lake to bring life and excitement one more time. The work ends with an upbeat, triumphant finale that challenges the orchestra's technical and endurance abilities.”

Antonín Dvořák

Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 53

THE VITAL STATS

Composer: Born September 8, 1841, Nelahozeves, near Kralupy (now the Czech Republic); died May 1, 1904, Prague

Work composed: July 5 – mid-September, 1879. Revised 1879-1883. Dedicated to Joseph Joachim.

World premiere: October 14, 1883 in Prague, with Mořic Anger conducting and František Ondříček performing the solo part.

Instrumentation: solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Estimated duration: 31 minutes

“Would you like to write a violin concerto for me? Highly original, tuneful and for good violinists? Let me know what you think!” When Antonín Dvořák received this suggestion from publisher Fritz Simrock in January 1879, he jumped at the opportunity. Dvořák was not an unusually slow composer, and he had studied violin as a child, so he was both familiar and comfortable with the instrument. However, it took him more than four years to complete his only violin concerto.

Joseph Joachim was one of the 19th century's greatest violinists and a child prodigy (he performed Beethoven's violin concerto under the direction of Felix Mendelssohn when he was just twelve years old). Joachim was also the inspiration for several major violin concertos, including Brahms' and Schumann's. Dvořák valued Joachim's opinion and experience; after finishing the first draft, Dvořák sent it to Joachim, who advised a number of changes, some of them substantial. As Dvořák explained in a letter to Simrock, “At his [Joachim's] request, I have revised the whole concerto; not a single bar has been left unaltered. I have no doubt that he will be pleased with what I have done. I have taken immense trouble over it. The whole concerto has now assumed a different aspect.” After this first revision, Dvořák undertook a second in 1882, to address Joachim's misgivings about the dense orchestration, through which Joachim worried that “not even the fullest tone” would penetrate. Despite his many concerns, Joachim was an ardent supporter of Dvořák's music. In a letter to Dvořák, Joachim wrote, “While working on this revision I was struck by the many beauties of your work, which it will be a pleasure for me to perform.” As it happened, Joachim did not premiere the concerto; in fact, he never played it in public.

It is possible Joachim chose not to perform the concerto because, as a musician of extremely conservative tastes, he could not endorse Dvořák's unusual structural choices. There are three movements, but the first two, which contrast the energy and power of the orchestra with the singing lyricism of the solo violin, are played without pause. The finale features distinctly Czech folk dances and rhythms, a wild *furiant* and a gentle *dumka*.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Kolokola (The Bells), Op. 35

THE VITAL STATS

Composer: born April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia; died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, CA

Work composed: 1913, based on Edgar Allen Poe's poem, *The Bells*, freely translated by Russian poet Konstantin Balmont. Dedicated to Willem Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam

World premiere: Rachmaninoff led soloists E. I. Popova, A. D. Alexandrov, and P. Z. Andreyev, along with the chorus and orchestra of the Maryinsky Theater, on December 13, 1913, in St. Petersburg.

Instrumentation: soprano, tenor, and baritone soloists, SATB chorus, piccolo, 3 flutes, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, celesta, cymbals, glockenspiel, side drum, tambourine, triangle, piano, harp, and strings

Estimated duration: 40 minutes

"All my life I have taken pleasure in the differing moods and music of gladly chiming and mournfully tolling bells." – Sergei Rachmaninoff

As a child, Sergei Rachmaninoff attended church regularly with his maternal grandmother, Sophia Alexandrovna Butakova. Under her influence, Rachmaninoff absorbed the sound of church bells as easily and unconsciously as he did the fresh country air of his family's estate in Oneg. "[Bells] accompanied every Russian from childhood to the grave, and no composer could escape their influence," the adult Rachmaninoff remembered.

Bells and bell-like sounds became a central color in Rachmaninoff's compositional palette; he used them in several works, including the Symphonic Dances, the Second Piano Concerto, various solo piano works, and, of course, in his Op. 35 choral symphony, *The Bells*, loosely based on a Russian translation of the eponymous poem by Edgar Allen Poe.

The story of Rachmaninoff's introduction to *The Bells* begins with an incident that almost strains credulity. Mikhail Bukinik, a friend and colleague of Rachmaninoff's, had a young cello student who had read Balmont's translation of Poe and was seized with the notion that Rachmaninoff, whose music she admired, should set it to music. Many years later, Bukinik recalled, "That he [Rachmaninoff] must do this became her *idée fixe*, and she wrote anonymously to her idol, suggesting that he read the poem and compose it as music ... [a few months later] she read a newspaper item that Rachmaninoff had composed an outstanding choral symphony based on Poe's "The Bells" and it was soon to be performed. Danilova was mad with joy ... She told me the whole story ... [and] I kept my pupil's secret until Rachmaninoff's death."

(A word about Konstantin Balmont's "translation." Balmont's version is more of a reinterpretation than a literal rendering of Poe's poem. The Symbolist Balmont did not try to preserve Poe's metrical rhymes, or copy Poe's repetition of words, both of which give *The Bells* its unique rhythm. Those familiar with Poe's original text know the specific rhyming rhythms Poe employed, and his use of invented words to describe the metallic jingling sound of sleigh bells; "Oh, the tintinnabulation of the bells, bells, bells" is the most famous example. Balmont's version describes the four different bells in a dramatic narrative arc.)

Musically, Rachmaninoff uses the verses of "The Bells" as the structural foundation for a typical symphony in four movements, albeit a symphony that includes three soloists and mixed chorus. Silver

Sleigh Bells whisks us away on a midnight sleigh ride through the crisp cold of a winter's night. Tenor, chorus, and orchestra describe the rushing of the runners, the sleigh bells' merry ringing, and the rosy-cheeked excitement of the passengers.

Rather than the straightforward joy usually associated with a wedding, the music of Mellow Wedding Bells is discreet and subtle, even subdued. The chorus and soprano sing, "Listen to the wedding bells' holy call!/What tender bliss is in that youthful song!/Through the calm night air/They appear like someone's eyes/Gleaming ... They cast a brilliant light/Upon future ages where tender dreams slumber in peaceful sleep."

Loud Alarum Bells summon us to a raging fire: "Hear the howling warning bell,/The very groaning bronze of hell! These pitches declaim a horrific tale of torment./Indeed they plead for help,/Cries sent out in the night." The chorus relates the horrific destruction (Balmont amplified Poe's original text), while the instrumental and choral music together convey dread, fear, and the fire's terrible destructive power.

Mournful Iron Bells begins with funeral music sounded by a poignant English horn solo. The baritone soloist intones, "Hear the funeral bell ring; Long does it ring! Bitter sorrow in audible pitches, a bitter life ending in slumber. An iron note announces the funereal melancholy. And against our wills we shiver ..." Poe's text emphasized the horror that hearing funeral bells provokes. Balmont and Rachmaninoff focused instead on the eschatological implications of death and oblivion. Rachmaninoff's signature use of the *Dies irae* melody borrowed from the Requiem liturgy is particularly effective. It signals the appearance of a haunting specter, which rings the bells with demonic glee. Rachmaninoff provides some comfort in the closing orchestral postlude, which offers a promise of peace and rest for the departed.