

DLA Doctoral thesis – a summary

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The Profane Choral Works of Rachmaninoff

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I. The antecedent of research

Sergei Rachmaninoff is primarily known as one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century and a composer of piano works. Numerous recordings represent his piano playing which have always been, and are still today, very popular. Nevertheless, the musical activity of the Russian artist was much more versatile. Rachmaninoff had a long history of working as an opera conductor and composed a large number of vocal works, including three complete operas, songs, a cappella and accompanied choral works for sacred and profane texts. Although these works were very popular in their time, nowadays most of them are almost unknown.

My doctoral thesis is written about this neglected side of Rachmaninoff, namely his choral works for profane texts. These pieces are rarely performed – except *The Bells*. Several studies have been written about *The Bells* especially in English and in Russian, however, most of them are short and hardly available. These studies mostly investigate the use of the *Dies irae* motif in the work. All the choral pieces are only mentioned in different studies, mainly in connection with *The Bells*.

II. Sources

No monograph has been published any about Rachmaninoff in Hungarian. His biography is known only from the musical guide books or sheets of concert programs which are inappropriate for research. *The History of Russian Music* written by Yuri Keldish contains a short chapter about Rachmaninoff. This book was published in Hungarian in 1958, consequently it shows the political style of its era which may make it interesting for the present day reader but it is unsuitable for scientific work. Rachmaninoff spent a large part of his life in the United State of America, so the Russian composer is a popular matter of American musicology.

The greatest treasures of Rachmaninoff's bibliography in Russian are his letters. These were first published in 1955, edited by Zaryu Apetovny Apetyan at the „Государственное Музыкальное Издательство” (State Musical Publisher) in Moscow. Between 1978 and 1980 Apetyan published his work in an extended edition in three volumes at „Всесоюзное Издательство” (Alliance Publishers) in Moscow. Yuri Keldish published a Rachmaninoff-monograph in 1973 but it contains some inaccuracies.

There are two catalogues of the works of Sergei Rachmaninoff, one of them is edited by Robert Palmieri, the other is by Robert Threlfall and Geoffrey Norris. These

works should be best used together. The Threlfall–Norris catalogue contains many more details of the works than Palmieri. On the other hand Palmieri's book contains Rachmaninoff's repertoire as pianist and conductor, his recordings and bibliography.

Besides these there are numerous monographs of differing-length about Rachmaninoff available in English. Geoffrey Norris and Robert Threlfall published theirs separately. Norris wrote the Rachmaninoff article for the Grove Lexicon. Patrick Piggott wrote a concise and reliable monograph. The studies of Alfred Julius Swan are also reliable – the musicologist did know the composer personally. Despite some obvious mistakes, Robert Walker's Rachmaninoff-monograph published in 1980 is a readable book which includes many different aspects.

The musicologist Oskar von Riesemann published a book in 1934 with the title of *Rachmaninoff's Recollections*. This biography seems to be the least reliable source. It contains a lot of fictional stories and quotes facts inaccurately. Despite these shortcomings, most of writers on Rachmaninoff's literature prefer to use this book.

In my opinion Bertensson and Leyda's monograph is the most reliable source of research on Rachmaninoff. His widow, the two daughters, and Sophia Satina all helped the two musicologists in writing this book, which contains many details of letters and recollections from Rachmaninoff's friends and colleagues as well. *Rachmaninoff and the Symphony* written by David Butler Cannata assisted me concerning *The Bells*.

III. Method

My first chapter presents Rachmaninoff as a composer of vocal works. Bertensson and Leyda's monograph and the two catalogues were the most important sources in writing that. All the other chapters are analyses of the profane choral works of Rachmaninoff one by one. They present the formation history and the structure of these works. I analyzed the inner connections of the motifs as well as their connections with other works. The appendix lists all the poems used by Rachmaninoff in his profane choral works. One can find the original texts with my Hungarian rough translations there. If one exists I attached the Hungarian literary translation for each poem. In some cases Rachmaninoff modified the original texts; these

modifications are mentioned in the chapters. There is a huge discrepancy between Poe's original poem *The Bells* and its Russian translation made by Balmont. I put the two versions together to make the comparison easy. I did the same with Lermontov's *Pine tree* and Heine's *A Pine Is Standing Lonely*. Lermontov made a literary translation of Heine's poem but he always marked it as his own.

There are three editions available of the *Six choral works* Op. 15 which all are questionable so they needed to be compared. Although there are several studies about *The Bells*, none of them has paid attention to two basic questions – its genre and the four versions of the third movement. I tried to give a detailed study of these.

IV. Results

The most spectacular result of my analyses is the chapter about the *Six choral works* Op. 15. After comparing all the editions and recordings available, I managed to prove that the edition of Muzyka in 1976 had presented an altered text of the first piece which makes it very much like a song of the Soviet-era. Rachmaninoff had never written music for that text. Unfortunately the Dutch Harmonia Publishers published the movement *Be Glorious* with its

altered text in 1993. Furthermore, Harmonia Publishers claimed that their edition was scientifically accurate, which proved to be rather harmful because a lot of choral conductors feel that the text of the first movement is unacceptable, consequently they do not conduct the whole opus. The poet's family name in the second piece raised questions. There were two versions mentioned in the scores and books – Lodyzhensky and Ladyzhensky. I managed to determine which one was correct.

Two short a cappella choral works are also presented. Their texts were written by Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy. The structure of the *Spring* cantata refers to the principal motif technique of late-romantic Russian opera. I denominated each motif and tried to explain how Rachmaninoff used them to interpret the poem.

I made an analysis on the *Boots* and *Three Russian Songs* Op. 41 to show how the features of the folk polyphony appear in these works of Rachmaninoff. During this work I came across the name of Nadezhda Plevitskaya, a folk singer, who is only mentioned in the literature of Rachmaninoff outside Russia.

There has been no comprehensive study of the profane choral works of Rachmaninoff until now. I analyzed *The Bells*

mainly from the aspect of developing motifs and the relationship between the orchestra and the choir. These aspects are absent in the studies available.

V. Activity relating to the subject matter of the thesis

At first I paid attention to the music of Rachmaninoff as a pianist. My repertoire contains several pieces from the *Morceaux de fantaisie* Op. 3, the *Morceaux de salon* Op. 10, the *Preludes* Op. 23 and Op. 32, the *Etudes- tableaux* Op. 33 and Op. 39. I have accompanied many songs from the Op. 4, Op. 8 and Op. 14. As a choir member I have often participated in performing numerous parts of the *Vespers*. I have also had the opportunity to conduct pieces from the *Vespers*. I have been working in an American summer camp as a music specialist for years where I give lectures regularly on the music of Rachmaninoff. I monitor the new recordings made of the composer's works as well as the result of the project named *Sergei Rachmaninoff: Critical Edition of the Complete Works* (RCW) issued by Russian Music Publishers and the new 'urtext' editions of the works of Rachmaninoff issued by G. Henle Verlag and Boosey & Hawkes.