2 *It Tolls for Thee*

The scene: Ludgate Hill one Sunday in June 1914 with the bells of St. Paul's in full swing. A passing taxi suddenly pulls to a halt. Inside, the young Igor Stravinsky – visitor to London for his new opera *The Nightingale* (1908-14) – is listening intently and scribbling notes on a scrap of paper. He turns to his companion, the critic Edwin Evans, and exclaims: "That is really the ideal way of making music. A man pulls a rope … the bells do all the rest. The music is not in him; it lives in the bells …"[1]

Evidently, the business of bell-ringing appealed to Stravinsky, not only as a Russian, but also as an anti-romantic, dedicated to suppressing Wagnerian subjectivity through a renewal of the ritualistic. But his remark is also historically suggestive. For something like 800 years, composers fascinated by bell sounds have been trying to absorb them into the fabric of Western music, yet somehow, the bells have always resisted the process. The most obvious reason for this is the sheer weight and size of genuine church bells. 'Great Paul', the tenor, or lowest bell of the scale of 12 Stravinsky was listening to, has a fundamental tone no deeper than D sharp below middle C, but it weighs 16,003 kilogrammes. A few theatres, such as the Bolshoi, have a set of church bells for operatic effects; dragging them on to the concert platform, however, is another matter.

Of course, musicians have used smaller sets of chimes and hand-bells since the Middle Ages, but no one ever pretended they remotely approached the sonority of the real thing. For the church bells in the satanic finale of his *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), Berlioz was obliged to prescribe an alternative of pianos and gongs, and a variety of contraptions with piano wires and what-not have been tried over the years for the deep bells of Montsalvat in Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) – while tubular bells, apparently first used in Arthur Sullivan's oratorio *The Golden Legend* in 1886, remain lightweight substitutes. These days, it is possible to use a recording of bells or to link up a live performance electronically with a belfry miles away for passages such as the end of Gustav Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony (1894), which demand a surpassing clamour. But it is still not quite the real thing.

Then again, even a tuned church bell is a complex sound. In addition to its fundamental tone, one may hear a so-called hum note an octave below and a fainter scale-like array of higher resonances known as upper partials and usually dominated by the minor third immediately above the fundamental. These are all clearly audible in Jonathan Harvey's remarkable tape piece, *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco* (1980), based upon an electronic analysis of the great tenor bell of Winchester Cathedral. If a bell remains untuned or has suffered a fault in casting, its resonances are likely to compound a more

complex character still – as we all know from the baleful boomings of Big Ben.

Because a set, or 'ring', of bells is usually tuned in a major scale, the minor-sounding upper partials impart a continuous tingle of dissonances – technically known as false relations – when they are rung in a melodic sequence. When several bells are heard simultaneously, as in the harmonized tunes of seventeenth-century Dutch carillons, it can sound very weird indeed. And, not least, bell-ringing developed long ago into an entire craft on its own. On the Continent, it has been traditional to allow each bell to swing at a rate governed by its own weight, thus setting up continuous cross-pulsations between them – an effect echoed by Busoni in the prelude to his opera *Doktor Faust* (1916-23). But seventeenth-century England saw the emergence of an intricate practice of varying chimes by methods of permutation known as change-ringing. One could argue that a complete cycle of, say Stedman Doubles – named after the greatest campanologist of the day – pre-empts the Minimalism of Steve Reich by three centuries.

No doubt the unwieldiness of church bells, the problems of matching their resonances with traditional harmonies and textures and, maybe, the mystique of bell-ringing, have inhibited all but the boldest composers from attempting any sustained fusion. But the vocal, instrumental and orchestral music of the West is, by comparison, full of sounds and patterns suggested by bells. Already, in a fourteenth-century anonymous English motet, *Campanis cum cymbalis*, one hears the lower voices chiming like bells. William Byrd captures the sounds of change-ringing in his hypnotic keyboard tour-de-force, *The Bells*, from around 1600. J. S. Bach could rarely resist plucked chords and pinging woodwind patterns where his cantata texts referred to bells – most graphically in a recitative of No. 198, the *Trauerode* (1727), which symbolizes all the funeral bells in Saxony lamenting its dead Electress.

The Viennese Classical composers, manipulating perhaps the most integrated and self-referential language music has ever known, seem to have been the least interested in bells. But their sounds soon reappear amidst the picturesque paraphernalia of Romanticism – for instance, the tolling trombones at the climax of the fourth movement of Schumann's 'Rhenish' (Third) Symphony (1851), inspired by a visit to Cologne Cathedral. Most preoccupied, of course, were the Russians, inspired by their own layered tradition of bell-ringing; one thinks of Rimsky-Korsakov's tintinnabulating *Russian Easter Festival* overture (1888), or Rakhmaninov's birth-to-death choral symphony, *Kolokola* (1913) setting Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'The Bells'. Even here, it was Mussorgsky, the composer least beholden to musical tradition, who drew bell sounds most convincingly into his continuities – as in the awesome grandeur of the coronation scene of *Boris Godunov* (1874) or the serene prelude to *Khovanshchina* (1872-80). And of French composers, it

was those influenced by the Russians – Debussy, Ravel and Messiaen – who evoked the most vivid bell sounds, though often touched by intimations of that wholly other source of bell-like sonorities, the far-Eastern gamelan.

Among other twentieth-century figures, Manuel de Falla had an especially fine ear for the overtones of the Spanish bells in his background, and bell-registrations also mark the piano writing of Poulenc. Meanwhile, the English have drawn strikingly from their own tradition. Britten's 'Sunday Morning' Interlude in *Peter Grimes* (1945) climaxes in one of the most cunning of all re-creations in orchestral terms of a deep bell sound; Tippett ran a familiar pattern of change-ringing through the brilliant Intrada of his *Birthday Suite for Prince Charles* (1948); and Gordon Crosse's *Changes* (1966), an entire choral work founded on bell texts and sounds, deserves far more frequent performance. But of all the moderns, Stravinsky remains the most bell-obsessed, from the 'Infernal Carillon' in *The Firebird* (1910) by way of the cracked wind-band chimings of the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920) to the hieratic resonances of his culminating masterpiece, the *Requiem Canticles* (1966).

And never more so than in the aftermath of that moment of exaltation on Ludgate Hill. Transcribing his jottings of the St. Paul's Bells into a sketchbook, Stravinsky recorded what had really moved him: 'Astonishingly beautiful counterpoint such as I have never heard before in my life.'[2] That same month in London, he conceived his cantata on Russian wedding customs, *Les noces*, which was finally to emerge in 1923 for soloists, chorus and an unprecedented accompaniment of four pianos and extensive percussion. At the end of its 25 minutes of joyous chanting and stamping, the voices fall silent and we are left with the spacious resonances of bells, as though some long-term cycle of permutations was coming round to its conclusion. It is a totally original ending, yet one that sounds as if it had always been waiting to be written: an ending, as it were, both before and after music.

NOTES

Source: 'It Tolls For Thee', *The Independent*, 22 December, 1990.

1 Quoted in: Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and His Works*, 2nd ed., London, Faber, 1979, p. 564.

2 Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents*, London, Hutchinson, 1979, pp. 126-27.