

Poetry and Music
Walter de la Mare (1889-1960)

'The Bells'

(The Listeners and Other Poems)

Although Walter de la Mare's first published poems (a collection of individual poems) date from 1906, the poet's first major publication was *The Listeners and Other Poems* (1912). Taken from this collection, 'The Bells' is a highly evocative and mystical poem set within the Edwardian countryside, while illuminating such practise as horse-driven ploughing, bell-ringing in an English parish church, and the ploughman's children happily playing alongside their father in the field – not on their electronics as in the 21st century.

This poem depicts four scenes: (i) the bells and ringers, (ii) the ploughman working and hearing the bells, (iii) the ploughman's children playing while the bells peel, and (iv) night-time. The first scene presents the bell ringers (Shadows and light both strove to be/The eight bell-ringers' company). It goes on further to describe the actual tower (While rang and trembled every stone).

In the second scene, the poet introduces the ploughman and his children playing ("Still swang the clappers to and fro/When in the far-spread fields below/I saw a ploughman ... with his team ...). The ploughman, of course, acknowledges the bells (I saw a ploughman with his team/Lift to the bells and fix on them/His distant eyes ...).

In the third scene the playing children are depicted. They are quite unconscious of the bells (While near him his children three/... Played undistracted on, as if/What music earthly bells might give/Could only faintly stir their dream/And stillness make more lovely seem).

In night-time scene the poet describes the horses and children using a most beautiful description "... In sleep deep and ambrosial". However, though in deep sleep the bells "rang on in a dream/And stillness made even lovelier seem".

The only poem in the collection which has been set to music is 'The Bells'. Armstrong Gibbs set this poem as a song for solo voice and piano in 1918. Gibbs commences his song with a depiction of the peel of bells which becomes an ostinato virtually throughout. This consists of a falling and short-long figure involving a 2nd (virtually an acciaccatura). The soloist now imaginatively commences his tale against the peel of bells. A trill effect suggests the quivering of the bell-tower under the weight and sound of the bells (While rang and trembled every stone). A key change and reduction in dynamics (at the beginning of the second scene – "Still swang the clappers to and fro/When, in the far-spread fields below/I saw a ploughman with his team" - moves the song along to its conclusion of pianissimo. The ostinato continues until the phrase "... What music earthly bells might give/Could only faintly stir their dream/And stillness make more lovely seem" at the end of scene 3. Now, there are sustained chords in the piano part, with a melodic climax on the word "lovely".

In the sleep scene (scene 4) the ostinato returns, now transposed and pianissimo (suggesting the distance of the bells in dreams). As in the previous scene, the final line has the hauntingly beautiful climax on the word "lovely" employing a long sustained top note in the voice against piano arpeggiation.