

The Golden Bell of Ko

Ballet in Three Scenes

The narrative was written by Norris Davidson and spoken by him at the RTÉ concert performance of 25 June 1974

1 Introduction

This story comes from good and bad days, from romantic and evil days, from days of culture and slavery in China of the Mandarins centuries ago.

The music brings us to the courtyard of a bell foundry. Obviously the bell-maker isn't here because his apprentices are dancing. His workmen hammer on their anvils but their industry weakens and they begin dancing themselves.

2 (at bar 144)

'The bell-maker! Quickly! Back to work!' Everyone scatters.

3 (at bar 156)

The last and worst of the apprentices escapes with a rude gesture towards his master

4. (at bar 157)

If you were watching this in ballet form, as it began, you'd now see the three dutiful daughters of the bell-maker entering with his pipe, his tobacco and a small glowing fire. They dance.

5 (at bar 241)

Something is heard outside now, something to startle the three dutiful daughters into hiding.

6 (at bar 250)

The Mandarin and his retinue: the Mandarin, his retinue and his dreaded Comptador, who controls everything and is the Mandarin's enforcer. This Comptador now orders the bell-maker to cast a bell of gold more beautiful than any before it. Failure will entail loss of head.

7 (at bar 297)

The Mandarin leaves the foundry. The importance of his Comptador's word remains

8 (at bar 321)

The three daughters are full of joy: they regard the order as a rich commission for their father. They don't know about conditions.

9 (at bar 412)

The bell maker comes back in a state of gloom. He's in no mood to answer his daughters' questions: 'I must build the most beautiful golden bell in the world indeed – or lose my head.'

10 (at bar 512)

Now we're in the bell-maker's house His workmen and apprentices are hammering and singing. But there is no song in the bell-maker's heart. He simply can't cast the bell: failure after failure! The three daughters try to console their father. But he is not in the mood to receive consolation: he simply can't cast such a bell.

11 (at bar 537)

Suddenly the Comptador comes in: 'Where's the bell? Is the bell ready?'

12 (at bar 566)

And when he is told that it hasn't been cast, he narrows down what would now be called the penalty clause of the agreement: the bell to be cast within 24 hours or loss of head

13 (at bar 578)

Now the three dutiful daughters know everything: they know that their father's life depends on the bell and they grieve with him.

14 (at bar 604)

The household god – that's what the daughters turn to. The household god will give advice!

15 (at bar 630)

The face of the idol glows; and the message to the daughters is this: they must sacrifice themselves to save their father

16 (at bar 661)

The three daughters again – but this time they are dressed as brides.

17 (at bar 670)

The daughters dance a sad bridal dance.

18 (at bar 692)

Now as though in play, as though they were trying to cheer him by a childish game, the daughters bandage their father's eyes. He can't see them. Slowly and dutifully they move to the great crucible of molten metal.

19 (at bar 709)

One by one they throw themselves in. The red glow of the furnace changes to pure and blazing white; the bell is miraculously cast and rises out of the fire. The souls of the dutiful daughters rise above it, the voices of wisdom and experience entolling the Golden Bell of Ko.