

## Scheherazade Symphonic Suite, Op. 35

Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov

Born 1844

Died 1908

I. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship

II. The Kalendar Prince

III. The Young Prince and the Young Princess

IV. Festival at Baghdad. The Sea.

The Ship Breaks against a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman.

Although Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov became one of the grand masters of Russian music, he was not a celebrated child prodigy like so many other composers one can name. At the beginning, music played only a secondary role in his life. He did take piano lessons as a child with local teachers, and later study with professional musicians such as Theodore Canille. It was indeed through Canille that Rimsky-Korsakov was introduced to composers Balakirev, Cui and Borodin, a group of young musicians who ultimately became famous as the "The Five" or "The Mighty Handful." He learned the art of orchestration rather late in life. His first serious career was actually that of a naval officer in St. Petersburg, Russia.

In 1862 Rimsky-Korsakov was sent aboard the clipper ship *Almaz*, on a voyage that would last over two years. Was it the time he spent touring the world that gave him so sharp an ear for the exotic tonalities of foreign ports? During his excursion he kept in contact with Balakirev and apprised him of his musical progress. When in the summer of 1865, Rimsky-Korsakov returned to St. Petersburg, he completed his *First Symphony*, and Balakirev did him the honor of conducting the work.

Balakirev was indeed the greatest influence on Rimsky-Korsakov's achievements. It was at Balakirev's insistence that he accepted a professorship of Composition and Orchestration at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. But Rimsky-Korsakov was quite unsure of his abilities. All the musical grammar he knew he had learned by ear, although it was quite a discriminating ear. At the beginning of his tenure he probably learned more from his pupils than they did from him. To save face, he had to teach himself all he could possibly learn, and in short order.

After a time he was appointed Inspector of Naval Bands. At night, he would carry all sorts of instruments home with him to find out what each was capable of in terms on range, sonority, etc. This exposure, in addition to a great deal of study of counterpoint, writing and orchestration, gave him the resources to further his burgeoning musical ideas. It was typical of Rimsky-Korsakov's character to devote himself to learning, and he was able to teach himself so much about orchestration that he wrote a classic textbook on the subject. He taught several students at the Conservatory who achieved great fame as composers, including Prokofiev and Stravinsky.

Rimsky-Korsakov made use of both the purely Russian idiom and coloristic Oriental melodic patterns in his compositions. The *Russian Easter Overture* and the opera *Snow Maiden* are perfect examples of the purely Russian style, and *Scheherazade* (which we will hear tonight) and *The Golden Cockerel*, are works greatly influenced by the mystery of the Orient.

In 1883, Rimsky-Korsakov accepted a high paying position as Assistant Musical Director of the Imperial Chapel, but became bored with the job soon after. He underwent a fairly long spell in which he was uninspired to compose. Consequently, he produced very little music until 1887, the year Borodin died. It was then that Rimsky-Korsakov was faced with the task of finishing his friend's opera, *Prince Igor*. This undertaking was the catalyst that started him working again in earnest, and he soon wrote some of his most ambitious works, including *Scheherazade*.

The *Symphonic Suite Scheherazade, Op. 35*, completed August 7, 1888, is music about storytelling. *Scheherazade* is the female narrator of *Arabian Nights*, who saves her life by entertaining her husband the king with stories. Its first performance was in December of that year. Although *Scheherazade* and its individual sections have programmatic titles, and the composer initially penned an introductory scenario, he said later on that he had not tried to paint any definite images, but rather meant the title to merely guide the listener and take him where he wanted to go. Rimsky-Korsakov himself, wrote the following story as a preface to his score:

"The Sultan Schahriar, persuaded of the falseness and the faithlessness of women, has sworn to put to death each one of his wives after the first night. But the Sultana Scheherazade saved her life by interesting him in tales which she told him during one thousand and one nights. Pricked by curiosity, the Sultan put off his wife's execution from day to day, and at last gave up entirely his bloody plan.

Many marvels were told Schahriar by the Sultana Scheherazade. For her stories the Sultana borrowed from poets their verses, from folk songs their words; and she strung together tales and adventures."

Originally, Rimsky-Korsakov intended to label the first movement Prelude, the second Ballade, the third Adagio and the fourth Finale; but on the advice of many he did not do so. Instead he called them: I. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship, II. The Story of the Kalendar Prince, III. The Young Prince and the Young Princess, and IV. The Festival Of Baghdad-The Sea-The Ship Goes to Pieces on a Rock Surmounted by a Bronze Warrior. Subsequently his aversion to

indicating too definite a program for the piece led him to try to do away with these headings, but they have stuck in spite of him. The reason is probably the fact that the music is so dazzling, the listener wants guidelines that conjure the magic of a story.

The suite's four-movement setup imitates the structure of the classical symphony, a genre not usually employed in program music, and the movements tell the following tales:

I. The opening unison brings to mind the Sultan cajoled by Scheherazade. Her first tale is about the sea, and Rimsky-Korsakov's naval experiences stand him in good stead here. The ever-changing moods, colors and motion of the sea are put expertly to music, and they form a dramatic backdrop for the wanderings of the sailor Sinbad.

II. Scheherazade tells the story of the Kalender Prince, with the aid of the bassoon over muted basses. A fanfare in the trombone and trumpet and an extended cadenza ensue.

III. The light, muted pizzicato and drum accompaniment usher in the theme of the Prince and Princess in this movement.

IV. This scene of the Baghdad festival brings back the themes of the Kalender Prince, the Princess and the sea, with Sinbad's ship striking the rock with the bronze rider upon it. Scenes and characters are brought back from earlier movements, but reappear as if in a dream. (Rimsky-Korsakov felt that one of his best orchestral effects was achieved by the silence of the grand pause that severs the short passage just before the end. One wonders if the same ominous feeling would have been present without the pause and the two notes that come after it.)

I turn again to the composer's own words, as he logically and easily explains his creation. Rimsky-Korsakov simplifies this sparkling score with incredible orchestral coloration, its music of the ocean, the oriental dances and always fantasy, fantasy and more fantasy, roiling ahead to numerous dazzling climaxes when he says:

"In composing *Scheherazade* I meant... to direct slightly the hearer's fancy on the path which my own fancy had traveled, and to leave more minute and particular conceptions to the will and mood of each. All I had desired was that the hearer, if he liked my piece as symphonic music, should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders and not merely four pieces played one after the other and composed on the basis of themes common to all the four movements. Why then,...does my suite bear the name, precisely, of *Scheherazade*? Because this name and the title *The Arabian Nights* connote in everybody's mind the East and fairy-tale wonders; besides, certain details of the musical exposition hint at the fact that all of these are various tales of some one person (which happens to be Scheherazade) entertaining therewith her stern husband."

It is unfortunate that Rimsky-Korsakov didn't have time to furnish us with musical tales for the rest of the Arabian nights.