

Scheherazade, Symphonic Suite, Op. 35

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

The name of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov is cemented to those of his colleagues Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, and Musorgsky; together, they make up the “Russian Five” (or “Mighty Handful”), who represent the pinnacle of Russian nationalism in the later 19th century. An ardent proponent of his compatriots’ music, Rimsky-Korsakov went so far as to arrange, complete, or otherwise emend numerous works by Musorgsky and to finish notable operas that were left incomplete by their composers, including Dargomyzhsky’s *The Stone Guest* and Borodin’s *Prince Igor*. The completion of the latter occupied Rimsky-Korsakov (aided by his friend Glazunov) during the winter of 1887–88, and it is easy to imagine the evocative flavor of Central Asian music that permeates Borodin’s score getting Rimsky-Korsakov’s imagination pointed in a similar direction.

The idea of composing *Scheherazade* came to mind in the winter of 1887–88, but the actual composition waited until his summer vacation a few months later. An opera is by definition programmatic; the balance between exterior (programmatic) and interior (strictly musical) narrative in a symphonic work is a more delicate matter. Once Rimsky-Korsakov settled on *The Arabian Nights* tale of Scheherazade as the basis for his new orchestral piece, he pondered how much plot he wanted to inject into it. The prose introduction Rimsky-Korsakov attached to his score, once it was complete, clarifies that the suite has literary implications but does not in itself suggest the specific events that are depicted in tones:

The Sultan Shahriar, convinced of the duplicity and infidelity of all women, vowed to slay each of his wives after the first night. The Sultana Scheherazade, however, saved her life by the expedient of recounting to

the Sultan a succession of tales over a period of one thousand one nights. Overcome by curiosity, the monarch postponed the execution of his wife from day to day, and ended by renouncing his sanguinary resolution altogether.

Many were the marvels recounted to Shahriar by Scheherazade. For the telling of these things she drew from the verses of the poets and the words of folk songs and tales, connecting her stories one with the other.

In his memoirs, Rimsky-Korsakov provided details about the genesis of this work:

Originally, I had even intended to label Movement I of *Scheherazade* Prelude; II, Ballade; III, Adagio; and IV, Finale; but on the advice of Liadov and others I had not done so. My aversion for seeking too definite a program in my composition led me subsequently (in the new edition) to do

IN SHORT

Born: March 18, 1844, in Tikhvin, near Novgorod, Russia

Died: June 21, 1908, in Lyubensk

Work composed: summer of 1888

World premiere: November 3, 1888, with the composer conducting a Russian Symphony Concert at the Club of Nobility, St. Petersburg

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 12, 1905, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (a New York Philharmonic forebear)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: October 1, 2016, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 45 minutes

away with even those hints of it which had lain in the headings of each movement, like “The Sea,” “Sinbad’s Ship,” “The Kalendar’s Narrative,” and so forth.

He continued:

In composing *Scheherazade* I meant these hints to direct but 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. ... [The name *Scheherazade*] 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 (who happens to be Scheherazade) entertaining therewith her stern husband.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo) and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, snare drum, bass drum, tambourine, tam-tam, harp, and strings.

Listen for ... the Sultan and Scheherazade

The four movements of *Scheherazade* are unified through the recurrence of two overriding musical motifs, representing the Sultan and Scheherazade. These two principal characters are introduced at the outset of the opening movement in a sort of “rolling of the credits” that covers a mere 17 measures. The motif for the brutally powerful Sultan is sounded in the low brass and woodwinds, doubled by strings; Scheherazade is depicted by undulating phrases, most often given to the solo violin (played here by Concertmaster Frank Huang). The composer wrote:

The unifying thread consisted of the brief introductions to the first, second, and fourth movements and the intermezzo in movement three, written for violin solo and delineating Scheherazade herself as she tells her wondrous tales to the stern Sultan. The final conclusion of the fourth movement serves the same artistic purpose.

As the closing approaches, listeners are prepared for a slam-bang conclusion, but in the end, Rimsky-Korsakov offers a reminder that these are mere samples of a nearly endless sequence of tales. So it is that Rimsky-Korsakov’s symphonic suite ends gently and seductively, with the solo violin — Scheherazade herself — getting the last word.



Scheherazade, as depicted in an illustrated glass slide used by Ernest Schelling for the New York Philharmonic Children’s Concerts that he began in 1924