Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov
Born March 18, 1844, Tikhvin, near Novgorod, Russia.
Died June 21, 1908, Liubensk, near Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Sheherazade, Symphonic Suite, Op. 35

Rimsky-Korsakov composed Sheherazade in the summer of 1888 and conducted the first performance on November 3 of that year in Saint Petersburg. The score calls for two flutes and two piccolos, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, snare drum, bass drum, tambourine, tam-tam, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-seven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Rimsky-Korsakov’s Sheherazade were given at the Auditorium Theatre on October 29 and 30, 1897, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on October 24, 25, and 26, 2002, with Andrey Boreyko conducting. The Orchestra first performed this work at the Ravinia Festival on July 19, 1936, with Willem van Hoogstraten conducting, and most recently on August 8, 1993, with Riccardo Chailly conducting.


As a boy, Rimsky-Korsakov yearned to see the world, a desire fueled by his restricted upbringing (he had left his home town only three times by the time he was twelve) and by the letters his older brother Voin sent from the Far East, where he was serving in the navy. Young Nikolai fell in love with a sea he had never seen; he devoured books about it, memorized nautical terms, and even rigged up a model brig. Like many of his ancestors—and in obvious emulation of his brother—he set his heart on a career in the navy. But, at the age of seventeen, when his piano teacher introduced him to Balakirev, Cui, and Mussorgsky, he could no longer deny that the pull of music also was strong. By the time he graduated from the College of Naval Cadets in 1856 and was due to set sail on the Almaz for a thirty-month cruise, he confessed that he wanted to be a musician instead of a sailor. Although the ship took him to many distant ports, including New York City and Rio de Janeiro, Rimsky-Korsakov rarely traveled far from home once the voyage was completed, settling instead for the world of his imagination, which he depicted in the fiction of his undeniably potent and atmospheric music.

Rimsky-Korsakov first tried to capture the music of the Orient in his Antar Symphony; having no firsthand experience, he borrowed a French volume of Arab melodies collected in Algiers from his friend Alexander Borodin. He was particularly proud of composing a melody for Antar with “florid oriental embellishments” and later boasted that “the abundant use of oriental themes lent my composition an odd turn of its own, hardly in wide use until then. . . .” Within the decade, however, Rimsky-Korsakov was to hear oriental music for himself.

Early in July 1874, Rimsky-Korsakov took his wife and young child to Sevastopol on the southern coast of Crimea, across the Black Sea from Constantinople (now Istanbul). From there they traveled to the town of Bakhchisaray, where he marveled at “the coffee houses, the shouts of its vendors, the chanting of the muezzins on the minarets, the services in the mosques, and the oriental music.” Rimsky was intoxicated by the sounds of this otherworldly place. “It was while hearing the gypsy-musicians of Bakhchisaray that I first became acquainted with oriental music in its natural state, and I believe I caught the main feature of its character,” he later reported in My Musical Life. Music filled the streets from morning till night—“in front of every coffee house there was continual playing and singing,” he wrote. But seven years later, when he returned to Bakhchisaray, he was
stunned to discover that the authorities had cleaned up the streets, and the seductive sounds of the town remained a distant memory. Perhaps hoping to experience some of the local color the place now denied him, he sailed on to Constantinople, where he stayed three days before returning home.

In February 1887, Alexander Borodin died. Rimsky-Korsakov was devastated at the loss of his friend and colleague (he didn’t sleep all night after hearing the news) and within days, he decided to put his own work aside in order to complete Borodin’s famously unfinished opera *Prince Igor*. Sometime the following winter, while he was immersed in Borodin’s world of Polovtsian chiefs, harem girls, and Turkish invaders, Rimsky-Korsakov conceived his own oriental fantasy—an orchestral work inspired by *The Arabian Nights*, a collection of Arabic, Persian, and Indian tales that had held an enormous, almost uncanny fascination for many cultures since the ninth century. (*The Arabian Nights* had circulated throughout the West in Antoine Galland’s French translation since the early eighteenth century.) *Sheherazade*, as he came to call the work, was composed that summer.

*Sheherazade* consisted of “separate, unconnected episodes and pictures,” as the composer put it, from *The Arabian Nights*: snapshots, in other words, of a world he never knew. *Sheherazade* is a triumph of imagination over experience. It’s a feast of sumptuous colors and brilliant instrumental effects—by the man, after all, who literally wrote the book on orchestration—and it quickly became a favorite romantic showpiece and a landmark in the history of descriptive music.

Rimsky-Korsakov prefaced the score with a brief reminder of the premise behind the world’s first great serial story: to subvert the Sultan Shahriar’s vow to kill each of his wives after the first night, the Sultana Sheherazade spins an intricate web of to-be-continued tales, one per night, for 1,001 nights, ultimately fascinating and winning over the sultan.

By the time he wrote his autobiography, Rimsky-Korsakov shied away from a literal, programmatic reading of the score, denying that it depicted actual characters and episodes from *The Arabian Nights*. “In the majority of cases, all these seeming ‘leitmotifs’ are nothing but purely musical material, the themes for symphonic development,” he wrote. Originally, he claimed, he hadn’t even planned to give the four movements titles (beyond the musical labels prelude, ballade, adagio, and finale); his student Lyadov convinced him otherwise. The programmatic names he finally chose, however, don’t refer to specific tales in *The Arabian Nights* but to general scenes—Sinbad sailing the sea, a festival in Baghdad, a ship being dashed against the rocks. (Rimsky-Korsakov decided to omit the titles in the second edition of the score.) He conceded that the violin solo was meant to delineate Sheherazade, “as she tells her wondrous tales to the stern sultan,” but the imposing theme with which the score begins wasn’t reserved specifically for the sultan.

“In composing *Sheherazade* I meant these hints to direct only slightly the listener’s fancy on the path that my own fancy had traveled, and to leave more minute and particular conceptions to the will and mood of each,” Rimsky-Korsakov later wrote. “All I wanted was that the hearer, if he liked the piece as symphonic music, should carry away the impression that it is undoubtedly an oriental narrative of numerous and varied fairy-tale marvels, and not merely four pieces played one after the other and based on themes common to all four.”

Rimsky-Korsakov’s genius is for an art of illusion: it has nothing to do with the precise, note-specific observation of a latter-day ethnomusicologist. One day of sightseeing in Bakhchisaray was sufficient, for his purposes, to “capture the main feature” of oriental music. He sought to depict the Orient of people’s dreams, and that’s why he called the work *Sheherazade*: “Because this name and the title *The Arabian Nights* connote in everyone’s mind the East and fairy tales.” With this score, which immediately became a favorite of European and American armchair travelers, Rimsky-Korsakov ensured the power of that identification for years to come.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

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