

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov - *Russian Easter Overture*, Op. 36

Born March 18, 1844, Tikhvin, Russia.

Died June 21, 1908, Liubensk, near Saint Petersburg, Russia.

***Russian Easter Overture*, Op. 36**

Rimsky-Korsakov composed the *Russian Easter Overture* in 1888, and conducted the first performance in Saint Petersburg on December 15 of that year. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately fifteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first performances of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Russian Easter Overture* were given on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on November 24 and 25, 1911, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given March 15 and 16, 1951, with Rafael Kubelík conducting. The Orchestra first performed this overture at the Ravinia Festival on June 29, 1944, with Pierre Monteux conducting, and most recently on July 21, 1990, with James Conlon conducting.

Rimsky-Korsakov had never heard an orchestra until his father took him to Saint Petersburg to enroll in the College of Naval Cadets at the age of twelve. When he attended his first opera there, it was not the stage spectacle or the singing, but the great sound rising from the pit that excited him most. Early in 1857 he wrote home:

Imagine my joy, today I'm going to the theater! I shall see *Lucia!* I shall hear the enormous orchestra and the tam-tam! and I shall see how the conductor waves his little stick. In the orchestra 12 violins, 8 violas, 6 cellos, 6 double basses, 3 flutes, 8 clarinets, 6 horns and all that sort of thing.

Although he already composed music—he had written an "overture" for piano and a number of small pieces—his heart was set on a career in the navy. But by the time he graduated from the College of Naval Cadets in 1856 and was due to set sail on a thirty-month cruise, he realized that he wanted to be a composer instead and packed the manuscript of an unfinished symphony to take with him.

In time, Rimsky-Korsakov proved the wisdom of his career change, becoming not only a popular and influential composer (and the teacher of Stravinsky), but the man who literally wrote the book on how to compose for the instruments of the orchestra. (He probably is the first person to attend *Lucia* excited by the prospect of hearing the tam-tam.) He didn't write at the piano, like most composers, but composed directly for his instrument—the large virtuoso modern orchestra, and, as much as anyone before or since, he had an ear for distinctive, unconventional, and brilliant orchestral effects.

This overture was the last of three orchestral works Rimsky-Korsakov introduced in Saint Petersburg in the span of a year, following *Capriccio espagnole* and *Sheherazade*. As he wrote in *My Musical Life*, these three pieces "close this period of my activity, at the end of which my orchestration had reached a considerable degree of virtuosity and bright sonority without Wagner's influence, within the limits of the usual make-up of Glinka's orchestra."

The *Russian Easter Overture*—*Svetlyi prazdnik*, or Bright Holiday in Russian—is a vivid first-hand account of Easter morning service—"not in a domestic chapel, but in a cathedral thronged with people from every walk of life, and with several priests conducting the cathedral service." This is the first major work by a Russian composer to

be based entirely on themes from the *obikhod*, a collection of canticles of the Orthodox Church—a controversial choice that so offended Tsar Alexander III that he forbid having the overture played in his presence. Rimsky-Korsakov uses three original chants, two in the contemplative opening section ("Let God arise!" and "An angel wailed"), and a third ("Christ has risen from the dead") appears "amid the trumpet blasts and the bell tolling, constituting also a triumphant coda," as the composer put it.

Russian Easter was one of Rimsky-Korsakov's most vivid memories of his childhood in Tikhvin, in Novgorod province, where the sound of the nearby monastery bells rang out over the town. Each year, after the long, rough winter, Easter brought an explosion of colorful, joyous celebration. "This legendary and heathen side of the holiday, this transition from the gloomy and mysterious evening of Passion Saturday to the unbridled pagan-religious merry making of Easter Sunday, is what I was eager to reproduce in my overture."

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

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