

## ***Scheherazade***

### **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov**

Born: March 18, 1844 – Tikhvin, Russia

Died: June 21, 1908 – Liubensk, Russia

*Piece Length: Approximately 45 minutes.*

In 1862, a group of young Russian nationalist composers led by Mily Balakirev and César Cui formed what is known today as “The Five”. Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov would complete the group. Their goal was to create a style of Russian music that would be distinct from the music written in western Europe. Characteristics of these composers include the use of folk songs and dances, invented scales that are distinguishable from the more traditional major and minor scales used in the west, and a more unpredictable harmonic vocabulary that results in fresh and exciting progressions previously unheard. Likewise, these composers were fascinated and influenced by the art of the Eastern world. Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* showcases all of these elements.

Completed in the summer of 1888, *Scheherazade* is part of a remarkable two year period in which Rimsky-Korsakov completed his most famous orchestral works: *Capriccio espagnol* Op. 34, *Scheherazade* Op. 35, and the *Russian Easter Overture* Op. 36. It was also during this time that Rimsky-Korsakov helped complete Borodin’s opera *Prince Igor* (from which his famous Polovtsian Dances will be presented by the Omaha Symphony in April).

*Scheherazade* is loosely based on the tales found in *One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Middle Eastern folktales. Rimsky-Korsakov’s note in the score states: “The Sultan Schahriar, convinced of the perfidy and faithlessness of women, vowed to execute each of his wives after the first night. But the Sultana Scheherazade saved her own life by interesting him in the tales she told him through 1001 nights. Impelled by curiosity, the Sultan continually put off her execution, and at last entirely abandoned his sanguinary resolve. Many marvels did Scheherazade relate to him, citing the verses of poets and the words of songs, weaving tale into tale and story into story.”

The first movement, The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship, is novel in its construction. After the introduction, in which the listener is introduced to the Sultan’s motif in the bold opening and Scheherazade in the violin accompanied by the harp, we are launched into the movement, which follows an A-B-C-A-B-C-coda form. The A section takes the Sultan’s theme and accompanies it with a musical depiction of waves in the cellos. This section showcases an approach to melodic writing shared by The Five called “Protyazhnaya” (“drawn-out-song”). These melodies are characterized by a wide range in rhythmic content, tonal ambiguity, and asymmetrical phrases which are far different from the more symmetrical melodies found in Western classical music. This helps avoid squareness of the melody while pushing the momentum forward to the first tutti. This is followed by the more tranquil B section. Here, fragments of the Sultan’s theme seem to be in conversation with exotic birds represented by solo wind instruments. Fragments of Scheherazade’s theme soon takes over, continuing the sort of call and response that is a feature of the B section. The C section follows which features fragments of both themes along with waves from the A section which leads to a dramatic tutti before the three sections are restated one more time. A gentle coda, foreshadowing the ending of the entire work, brings the movement to its conclusion.

The second movement, The Story of the Calendar Prince, presents an extraordinarily unique concept of form. While it can easily be heard as a ternary form (A-B-A), Rimsky-Korsakov gives it a twist. Perhaps inspired by the “story within a story” format found in some of the tales of

*One Thousand and One Nights*, the A section is a set of variations that get progressively more complex in their harmony and orchestration that is interrupted by the arrival of the B section, before continuing where it left off in the final A section. After an introduction that once again presents Scheherazade's motif, the theme of the variations-reminiscent of Scheherazade's motif in its use of stepwise motion-is presented in a solo bassoon. The B section is more reminiscent of the Sultan's motif and is more march-like, featuring dotted-rhythms and triplets. Twice, the B section music is interrupted by another novel moment: unmeasured, improvisatory cadenzas first for a solo clarinet and later a solo bassoon against steady pizzicato strings.

The third movement, titled *The Young Prince and the Young Princess*, is the lyrical slow movement of work. Its form, A-B-A-B-coda, contrasts a beautiful, melody first introduced in the strings in the A section with a more animated and playful melody first heard in the winds in the B section that features dotted rhythms and off beat accents. The idea of contrast is further explored in the B section as the staccato, playful melody in the winds are answered with a more lyrical restatement of the theme in the strings, giving the effect of a conversation between the two sections of the orchestra. As the A section returns, it is soon interrupted by Scheherazade's music. The A section's music then continues as before, now accompanied by the solo violin. The movement ends with a charming coda that features rapid, scherzando passages in the winds that hint at Scheherazade's theme.

The final movement, labeled "Festival in Baghdad. The Sea. The ship breaks up against a cliff surmounted by a bronze horseman. Conclusion" by Rimsky-Korsakov starts in a similar manner as the opening of the work: an introduction that presents a more furious version of the Sultan's motif followed by Scheherazade's motif. We are then immediately taken to the festival that is illustrated with highly energetic music that features dotted rhythms and inventive usages of the percussion instruments. Throughout this section, various fragments of music are presented, including music from the second and third movements. The quick juxtaposition of various musical ideas (similar to what Stravinsky does in the opening of *Petrushka* heard in the last Masterworks concert) seems to reflect how one might visually take in this extraordinarily active event. As the festival seems to be reaching its climax, we are suddenly taken to the sea as Rimsky-Korsakov depicts the violent waves in the tutti orchestra while the first movement's A section theme is played by the brass. With the sound of the tam-tam (gong), the ship crashes. The gentle coda first presents the Sultan's motif the violins. The music is no longer bold and bombastic, but now calmer and lyrical. The coda of the first movement is restated and the work ends with Scheherazade's motif one last time as the peaceful ending reflects her fate: she will live.