



2025-26 Sunday Matinee

SCHEHERAZADE: ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

Sunday, October 19, 2025 @ 3 p.m.

Alexander Shelley, conductor

Pacific Symphony

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV *Scheherazade, Op.35*

*The Sea and Sindbad's Ship
(Largo e maestoso - Allegro non troppo)*

*The Tale of Prince Kalendar
(Lento - Allegro molto)*

*The Young Prince and the Princess
(Andantino quasi allegretto)*

*The Festival at Bagdad; The Sea;
The Ship Goes to Pieces on a Rock
(Allegro molto)*



Performance at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts
Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall



PROGRAM NOTES

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Born: Mar. 18, 1844, in Tikhvin, Russia

Died: Jun. 21, 1908, in Lyubensk, Russia

Scheherazade, Op. 35



Composed: 1888

Premiered: Oct. – Nov. 1888, in St. Petersburg, conducted by the composer.

Most recent Pacific Symphony performance: Feb. 2, 2019, in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall with Carl St.Clair conducting.

Instrumentation: Three flutes including piccolo, two oboes including English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.

Approximate duration: 42 minutes.

Scheherazade's germination began in 1887 with the death of the composer's friend Alexander Borodin, a seminal figure in Russian music and with Rimsky-Korsakov a member of the "Mighty Five." But in a broader sense, it can be traced to Rimsky's childhood. His experience of life was constrained by parents who sheltered him, but his imagination was fired by the older brother he idolized, and by the tradition of naval service in his family dating back generations. By age 12, Rimsky-Korsakov had ventured outside the confines of the town of Tikhvin only three times, but his brother was seeing the world in service to the Russian navy. Rimsky-Korsakov pored over letters from his older brother, and despite never having seen the sea, he became obsessed by it, immersing himself in nautical references and studying the fine points of naval practice, even constructing a model brig.

His career began with a combination of military and cultural elements that would be impossible to duplicate today, studying music while on a 32-month naval commission. Having seen the lands then known as the Orient, Rimsky-Korsakov first tried to capture their spirit in his *Antar* Symphony in 1868. But after taking his wife and young son on a trip that included the Crimean towns of Sevastapol and Bakhchisaray, he was deeply affected by his experience of foreign cultures teeming with sounds and music—"the coffee houses, the shouts of...vendors, the chanting of the muezzins on the minarets, the services in the mosques, and the oriental music." These inspired him to revise the *Antar* Symphony.

When Borodin died, the 42-year-old Rimsky-Korsakov tabled his own work to finish Borodin's incomplete opera *Prince Igor*. But his immersion in Borodin's music, inspired by distant Russian realms and Polovtsian folkways, seems to have reignited his musical wanderlust, and he soon began work on the "oriental fantasy" that became *Scheherazade*. It is an orchestral suite of symphonic scope based on *The Arabian Nights*, a compilation of Arabic, Persian, and Indian stories that had already been part of world culture for a millennium.

Scheherazade opens with a brassy warning, ominous and loud, with a distinctive tang we can't quite place. The

melody is spiced with chromaticism. East Asian? Arabian? Before we can be sure, this blaring statement is suddenly hushed, giving way to the ethereal voice of a lone violin. It is the voice of a woman, backed by harp chords that surround her like diaphanous veils. Of course she is the beautiful Scheherazade, and in a matter of seconds she has transported us to a setting whose exoticism is beyond anything we could imagine without Rimsky-Korsakov's brilliance. The newlywed Scheherazade is beguiling her husband and us with vivid tales of sultans, princes and the voyager Sinbad known to us as *The Thousand and One Nights*.

The four movements of *Scheherazade* bear names based on incidents in *The Arabian Nights*. But observations in Rimsky-Korsakov's memoirs confirm that the musical passages correspond not to individual plot details, but to a general sense of the overall narrative, with the listener invited to visualize a more specific scenario. In the first movement, "The Sea and Sinbad's Ship," we can easily supply it from the very beginning, when two oppositional themes—the overbearing, brass-dominated announcement of Sultan Shahriyar and Scheherazade's beautiful violin theme, introduced by a woodwind choir and tinged with melancholy—blossom into storytelling mode. Underlying both themes we can hear the ebbing, swelling sea.

The many stories of the 1,001 Arabian nights are ultimately the story of a single romance, as Scheherazade's wisdom and charm prove even more important than her beauty in saving

her life and redeeming the sultan from his bitterness—and as the suite progresses we sense the gathering triumph of romance in the onrushing lyricism of "The Young Prince and the Young Princess." This plays out in deft contrapuntal melodies riposting between high and low strings, woodwinds, and harp. This tapestry of themes culminates in a series of figures that are hushed yet seem on the verge of bursting with tense energy.

To listen to this orchestral spectacle is to experience one of Western music's great feats of orchestration. The New Zealand-based musicologist Paul Serotsky calls Rimsky-Korsakov "...the Master Magician of orchestration, surpassing even Wagner and Berlioz." (He closely studied Berlioz's *Treatise on Orchestration* and later wrote his own text on the subject.) "The music of *Scheherazade*," notes Serotsky, "is like a magic carpet: It can transport you to another world." In his autobiography, Rimsky-Korsakov bristled at the idea that his masterly evocation of color and texture was a surface feature of the score; rather, he deemed it the very essence of the music itself, no less than melody or harmony.

Michael Clive is a cultural reporter living in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut. He is program annotator for Pacific Symphony and has written numerous articles for magazines and newspapers in the U.S. and U.K. and hundreds of program notes for orchestras and opera companies. Operahound.com



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