

Scheherazade

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov 1844-1908

Scored for: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes (one doubling on English Horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, bass drum, tambourine, cymbals, gong, harp, and strings.

The folk song, the Orient, and the sea were the three influences of inspirations that pursued Rimsky-Korsakov throughout his career, and he never got very far away from any of them. --Carl van Vechten

Frederic Dorian, program note annotator for the Pittsburgh Symphony, composed the following about the Scheherazade tradition:

Oriental tradition attributes the wondrous folk tale *A Thousand and One Nights* to the wiles and charms of Sultana Scheherazade. Her sadistic husband, Sultan Schahriar of India, had killed each of his former wives after the wedding night: the wantonness of women, he claimed, drove him to these deeds of horror. Scheherazade, deciding that she was not going to share the fate of her beautiful predecessors, had to rely on her wits to avert her own doom. Night after night, she kept her lord spellbound with tales that were full of suspense, color, and humor. Cunningly, she managed never to complete her story by dawn. Scheherazade would withhold the most rewarding of her offerings until the following night, thus keeping her Sultan in a state of excited anticipation. Schahriar could hardly wait for the next night's installment. How could he do away with Scheherazade under the circumstances? After one thousand and one nights had passed, he finally realized that Scheherazade had become indispensable to him. The Sultan renounced his bloody custom.

In Rimsky-Korsakov's autobiography, *My Musical Life*, he comments as follows about his orchestral masterpiece *Scheherazade*:

The program I had been guided by in composing *Scheherazade* consisted of separate, unconnected episodes and pictures from *The Arabian Nights*: the fantastic narrative of the Prince Kalandar, the Prince and the Princess, the Baghdad festival, and the ship dashing against the rock with the bronze rider upon it. The unifying thread consisted of the brief introductions to movements I, II, and IV and the intermezzo in movement III, written for violin solo, and delineating Scheherazade herself as telling her wondrous tales to the stern Sultan. The conclusion of movement IV serves the same artistic purpose. [Another recurring theme is that of the impatient and often angry Sultan, which opens the entire work and is repeated numerous times in various guises and tempos.]

In vain do people see in my suite leading motives linked always in unvaryingly with the same poetic ideas and conceptions. On the contrary, in the majority of cases, all these seeming leitmotifs are nothing but purely musical material or the given motives for symphonic development. These give motives thread and spread over all the movements of the suite, alternating and intertwining each with the other. Appearing as they do each time under different moods, the self-same motives and themes correspond each time to different images, actions and pictures.

In this manner, developing quite freely the musical data taken as a basis of the composition, I had in view the creation of an orchestra suite in four movements, closely knit by the community of its themes and motives, yet presenting, as it were, a kaleidoscope of fairy-tale images and designs of Oriental character—a method that I have used in other compositions. Originally I had even intended to label the movements of *Scheherazade*: No. 1 “Prelude”; No. 2 “Ballade”; No. 3 “Adagio”; No. 4 “Finale”; but on the advice of Liadoff and others I did not do so. My aversion for the seeking a too definite program in my composition let me subsequently (in the second edition) to do away with even those hints of the story which I had included in the original headings of each movement, such as “The Sea,” and “Sinbad’s Ship,” et cetera.

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 listener. 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 four movements. Why, then, if that be the case, does my Suite bear the name, precisely, *Scheherazade*? Because this name and subtitle “After The Thousand and One 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 (which happens to be *Scheherazade*) entertaining therewith her stern husband.

The first movement, *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship*, opens with two opposing themes: a stern and solemn tune dominated by the brass, and a sinuous violin melody introduced by a woodwind choir. The former is the stern sultan; the latter is *Scheherazade*, weaving her tales. In this movement, the themes ebb and flow over a third rocking melody like the ocean's waves. *The Story of the Kalendar Prince*— a royal prince who disguised himself as a member of a tribe of wandering dervishes called *Kalendars* — features an "oriental" melody played in turn by both the full orchestra and different solo instruments, including bassoon, oboe, flute, and horn. The theme is offset by a brisk martial tune introduced by the brass, which in turn is interrupted by a clarinet solo that whirls like the dervishes of the title.

The lyric sweep of *The Young Prince and Princess*[movement III] is colored by a rising and falling counterpoint from woodwinds, harp, or upper strings against lower. Romantic melodies weave in and out, and the movement ends with a series of rapid, quiet figures that seem to dance into the distance. The solo violin of Scheherazade heralds the final movement, which bursts into a vigorous dance accented by cymbal and tambourine, *The Festival in Baghdad*. The dance becomes wilder, punctuated by snare and bass drum, and a brass fanfare announces a return to some of the themes of Sinbad and *The Sea*. The music rises and falls with the swell of the ocean until *The Ship Goes to Pieces on a Rock*. With a mighty crash, the music segues into a sweeping recapitulation of the Sultan's theme from the first movement, which then subsides as if the Sultan has been mollified. Scheherazade's violin ends the tale.