Great Russian Symphonies, Vol. 7 (2012)



Rimsky Korsakov: Symphony No. 2, Op. 9 'Antar' *1. I. Largo - Allegro - Largo - Allegretto - Adagio - Allegretto - Largo 9:36 2. II. Allegro 4:16 3. III. Allegro risoluto 5:15 4. IV. Allegretto - Adagio 9:15* Rimsky Korsakov: Scheherazade, Op. 35 *5. I. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship 10:43 6. II. The Kalender Prince 11:31 7. III. The Young Prince and the Young Princess 10:41 8. IV. Festival at Baghdad - The Sea 12:47*
St. Petersburg State Symphony Orchestra (1-4) Andre Anichanov - conductor Seattle Symphony Orchestra(5-8) Maria Larionoff (violin) Gerard Schwarz - conductor

Given to a lively imagination and a lust for travel, young Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's first career was exploring the world as a Naval Officer. When his first six month naval tour ended, however, his love of music captured him completely and sated his youthful lusts. His music was immediately championed by Balakirev, leader of the famous "Mighty Fistful" of five Russian Nationalist composers, including Mussorgsky (Pictures at an Exhibition) and Borodin (Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor). Though his only three symphonies were early compositions, his masterful abilities for orchestral coloring and tunefulness were already evident, and especially magical in Symphony No. 2, "Antar." Exotic folk tales, such as the legend of the Arab Antar, never ceased to fascinate Rimsky-Korsakov throughout his life.

The original Antar was born in what is now theUnited Arab Emiratesas Antarah Ibn Shaddād al-'Absi. He lived in pre-Islamic Arabian times (around 580) and was a famous poet and adventurer-warrior. His life, as expressed through his poems, created the basis for an epic folk legend written centuries later by Osip Syenkovsky describing an extravagant romance — full of battles, magic, fairies, love and death. Rimsky-Korsakov took a few liberties with the epic, and his Symphony follows this storyline: Antar's adventures have led him to the desert ruins ofPalmyra. Between wakefulness and dreams he comes across a gazelle about to fall prey to a ghoulish, giant bird. Antar defends the gazelle, which turns out to be the fairy Gul-Nazar, the Queen of Palmyra. For his chivalry, Gul-Nazar grants him the three joys his life has lacked,

Vengeance, Power and Love. The Symphony's first movement sets the parameters of the story, and the remaining three treat the three joys in succession.

Thematically Rimsky-Korsakov followed the lead of Hector Berlioz (Symphonie fantastique) by using specific themes to represent characters and literal themes throughout the whole work. The musical story begins with rising string figures,

The next theme is actually an Algerian folksong borrowed from Borodin, and which Rimsky-Korsakov orchestrated with exquisite deftness. Throughout the first movement, Antar's theme, broad and dignified, is most prominent. These themes, or idée fixes, then tie the whole Symphony together.

In the finale, Love has come to Antar through Gul-Nazar, but in this he will be consumed and die. In a lovely set of passages, we hear the beautiful flute theme of the fairy entwine with Antar's theme, and the story comes to a poignant close. Most clever throughout the Symphony is the melodic structure of Antar's theme, which allows Rimsky-Korsakov to change the harmonies upon the last note of the first phrase, and in this, the composer creates some breathtaking moments. ---Max Derrickson, musicprogramnotes.com

The idea for Scheherazade came to Rimsky-Korsakov during the early winter months of 1888 as he worked to complete Alexander Borodin's opera Prince Igor. Rimsky-Korsakov's output had diminished significantly since his appointment in 1883 as the assistant to his mentor, Mily Balakeriev, at the Court Kapella,1 and much of this time was spent editing and revising his older works along with those of colleagues like Modest Mussorgsky (who had died in 1881). It is possible that Rimsky-Korsakov's inspiration for a work with an Oriental character came from the Polovtsian Dances of Prince Igor,2 but exposure to such soundscapes can be traced back to as early as Balakeriev's Tamara.3 Indeed, the recurring solo violin sections of Scheherazade seem to be an idea that Rimsky-Korsakov borrowed unabashedly from the earlier symphonic poem of his teacher.

The story of Scheherazade and the Sultan is a form of storytelling known as a "framed narrative." It is a way of presenting shorter stories (in this case, the tales that Scheherazade

presents to the Sultan) within a larger, overarching narrative that binds them all together. Rimsky-Korsakov utilizes this storytelling technique in Scheherazade by having the solo violin represent the title character throughout the suite, and this recurring material acts to connect the four movements of Scheherazade in the same way that the larger story of Scheherazade and the Sultan connects the smaller tales of Arabian Nights.

Although Rimsky-Korsakov makes it clear that the violin represents Scheherazade, he also goes on to insist that any other motivic connections were never intended (though he understands why listeners might make such assumptions). One common misconception, for example, is that the Sultan has a recurring theme as well:

In vain do people seek in my suite leading motives linked unbrokenly with ever the same poetic ideas and conceptions. On the contrary, in the majority of cases, all these seeming Leitmotive are nothing but purely musical material or the given motives for symphonic development. These given motives thread and spread over all the movements of the suite, alternating and intertwining each with the others. Appearing as they do each time under different illumination, depicting each time different traits, and expressing different moods, the same given motives and themes correspond each time to different images, actions, and pictures… The unison phrase, as though depicting Scheherazada's stern spouse, at the beginning of the suite appears as a datum, in the Kalendar's Narrative, where there cannot, however, be any mention of Sultan Shakhriar.5

There are a number of recurring motives threaded throughout the suite, but Rimsky-Korsakov insists that they are purely musical in function and do not represent any specific characters or events. Interestingly, Rimsky-Korsakov eventually removed the original thematic names for each movement in a later edition, but that change was never widely adopted:

Originally I had even intended to label Movement I of Scheherazada Prelude; II, Ballade; III, Adagio; and IV, Finale; but on the advice of Lyadov and others I had not done so. My aversion for seeking too definite a program in my composition led me subsequently (in the new edition) to do away with even those hints of it which had lain in the headings of each movement, like The Sea; Sindbad's Ship; The Kalendar's Narrative; and so forth. In composing Scheherazada I meant these hints to direct but slightly the hearer's fancy on the path which my own fancy had travelled, and to leave more minute and particular conceptions to the will and mood of each. 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 the four movements.6

So, how does all of this affect us as bassoonists? In short, according to Rimsky-Korsakov, the solo and cadenzas found in “The Kalendar Prince” do not actually represent any character or plot point. This may be a difficult notion to accept, but Rimsky-Korsakov clearly and emphatically states that to be the case. Instead, the bassoon solo functions as a sort of expository opening to Scheherazade’s tale of the Kalendar Prince, presenting the audience with the mood and setting for the musical adventure to come. ---orchestralbassoon.com

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