

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

Born 18 March 1844 in Tikhvin, near Novgorod; died 21 June 1908 in St. Petersburg

Scheherazade, Opus 35 (1888)

PREMIERE OF WORK: St. Petersburg, 15 December 1888; Russian Musical Society; Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 22 April 1928; Syria Mosque; Eugene Goossens, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 47 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

"In the middle of the winter [of 1888], engrossed as I was in my work on *Prince Igor* and other things, I conceived the idea of writing an orchestral composition on the subject of certain episodes from *Scheherazade*." Thus did Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov give the curt explanation of the genesis of his most famous work in his autobiography, *My Musical Life*. His friend Alexander Borodin had died the year before, leaving his *magnum opus*, the opera *Prince Igor*, in a state of unfinished disarray. Rimsky-Korsakov had taken it upon himself to complete the piece, and he may well have been inspired by its exotic setting among the Tartar tribes in 12th-century central Asia to undertake his own embodiment of musical Orientalism. The stories on which he based his work were taken from *The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of millennium-old fantasy tales from Egypt, Persia and India which had been gathered together, translated into French, and published in many installments by Antoine Galland beginning in 1704. They were in large part responsible for exciting a fierce passion for *turquerie* and *chinoiserie* among the fashionable classes of Europe later in the century, a movement that left its mark on music in the form of numerous tintinnabulous "Turkish marches" by Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn and a horde of lesser now-faded lights, and in Mozart's rollicking opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. The taste for exoticism was never completely abandoned by musicians (witness Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* or Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* or *Turandot* or even *The Girl of the Golden West*; Ravel prided himself on his collection of Oriental artifacts), and proved the perfect subject for Rimsky-Korsakov's talent as an orchestral colorist.

To refresh the listener's memory of the ancient legends, Rimsky-Korsakov prefaced the score with these words: "The sultan Shakriar, convinced of the falsehood and inconstancy of all women, had sworn an oath to put to death each of his wives after the first night. However, the sultana Scheherazade saved her life by arousing his interest in the tales she told him during 1,001 nights. Driven by curiosity, the sultan postponed her execution from day to day, and at last abandoned his sanguinary design. Scheherazade told many miraculous stories to the sultan. For her tales she borrowed verses from the poets and words from folk-songs combining fairy-tales with adventures." To each of the four movements of his "symphonic suite" Rimsky gave a title: *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship*, *The Story of the Kalandar Prince*, *The Young Prince and the Young Princess* and *Festival at Baghdad — The Sea — Shipwreck*. At first glance, these titles seem definite enough to lead the listener to specific nightly chapters of Scheherazade's soap opera. On closer examination, however, they prove too vague to be of much help. The *Kalandar Prince*, for instance, could be any one of three noblemen who dress as members of the Kalandars, a sect of wandering dervishes, and tell three different tales. "I meant these hints," advised the composer, "to direct but slightly the hearer's fancy on the path which my own fancy had traveled, and 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."

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda