

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

EARS WIDE OPEN ONLINE FOR SCHOOLS

Deconstructing the Classics

SCHEHERAZADE

SECONDARY LEARNING RESOURCE

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

A feast of brilliant orchestral colours and evocative effects, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* is a landmark piece in descriptive instrumental music. For this Ears Wide Open online we're going to look at this musical account of the famous Arabian Nights and its captivating storyteller, as imagined by Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. *Scheherazade* quickly became a revered showpiece of orchestras the world over, after Rimsky-Korsakov himself conducted the work's premiere in Saint Petersburg in 1888. The performance we'll be looking at is the MSO conducted by Miguel Harth-Bedoya, at Hamer Hall in early 2020.

The sounds of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* are very familiar to music lovers. Not only has the piece itself been a regular item on concert programs the world over from very soon after it was written, but the style and the sound world of Rimsky-Korsakov and his group of Russian Nationalists has been an inspiration for many composers since. The extent of Russian influence on orchestral music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is quite extraordinary when you consider that the country had no real tradition of professional art music of its own until Mikhail Glinka wrote his first operas in the 1830s. Despite being rich with folk music and, like much of Europe, having a taste for imported Italian opera, there was no tradition of musical education and no local school of composition so there was very little opportunity for music as a profession. This absence of tradition was in some ways a barrier to overcome, but in other ways it was an enormous opportunity. A rich heritage of folk music, a very clear sense of national identity and very little precedent meant that the time was ripe for a group of visionary musicians, who became known as "The Five" or "The mighty handful", to forge **a distinctive Russian style**. **Refer to Discussion Point 1**. Many of the composers who undertook this work began their lives in other careers: Glinka and Tchaikovsky were both civil servants, Mussorgsky served in the army, Alexander Borodin was a chemist and Rimsky-Korsakov spent the first years of his working life as a naval officer.

DISCUSSION POINT 1

'The Mighty Handful'. With reference to the accompanying *Scheherazade* playlist, explore the works by Mussorgsky and Borodin, two further members of the 'Mighty Handful'. Identify the elements which place this music at the vanguard of 'a distinctive Russian style' – in particular, snatches of folk music and the use of the pentatonic scale often found in folk music.

Through *Scheherazade*, Rimsky Korsakov came to be emblematic of the Russian school of composition although ultimately his position on the very idea of a separate Russian tradition changed significantly. As such *Scheherazade* is a sort of reference point: an arrival and summation of the work of "The five", and a jumping off place for composers such as Stravinsky to strike off in another direction, from a now firmly established Russian identity.

DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE

For a work that evokes the 1001 stories that *Scheherazade* tells in the Arabian Nights and seems to present us with an endless parade of characters, colours, events and emotions, the work is surprisingly simple. The opening three ideas set the framework for the whole large-scale symphony.

These three ideas form the basis for the first movement and recur throughout the whole work. The way they are put together demonstrates a simplicity of construction that is applied throughout the piece, and also provides a clear example of how the Russian school established a unique sound.

The first powerful unison phrase, dominated by the low brass, can be quite clearly connected to the character of the evil, domineering sultan. Its first four bars establish a tonal centre of E, **but also delineate a whole-tone scale**. **The whole-tone scale was established in the Russian style by Glinka to depict ominous or evil people and situations**. **Refer to Discussion Point 1**. The second phrase bears a striking resemblance to the opening of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture*. As in that piece, this

sequence of chords serves to establish the tonal centre of the work, but here we have another feature of the Russian school – the rejection of the sort of functional harmony that had dominated European music since baroque times. The Mendelssohn chords delineate the harmony with tonic – dominant and then return to the tonic. In *Scheherazade* the five chords have only a loose relationship based in modal harmony that gives them their uniquely Russian sound. The chords are in fact a type of variation of the opening phrase, with the descending whole tone scale hidden in them and preface how Rimsky-Korsakov is able to use the variation of a single theme to create markedly different characters. Perhaps by association with the Mendelssohn work, this sequence of chords juxtaposed against the powerful opening phrase serves to make us understand we are entering a world of Fairy Tale and unreality and leads us to the other distinctly recognisable character in the piece: that of Scheherazade herself represented by the solo violin. This delicate florid motif is an example of the orientalism that was another important feature of Russian style. **It also demonstrates a harmonic process typical of Russian style: a chord with one note moving by step at each change.** Refer to Discussion Point 1.

After this simple but highly evocative introduction the rest of the movement proceeds as a series of variations. For example, the Sultan's theme appears like this.

And later like this.

While Scheherazade's theme passes from the solo violin to a more tumultuous version in the winds.

The variations are largely achieved with sophisticated orchestral colouration. Supporting these variations Rimsky-Korsakov adds the final pictorial element of the music, the undulating arpeggios which suggest the rolling of the sea. These sequences of modulating variations create large slabs of music that while not describing a specific story create a powerful sense of journeying and adventure. The sequences are punctuated by this peaceful interlude.

This is a transformation of the Mendelssohn chords from the introduction.

This simple but incredibly effective manipulation of three musical elements achieves Rimsky-Korsakov's stated aim: "All I desired was that the hearer...should carry away the impression that it is beyond a doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders and not merely four pieces played one after the other." He went on to say that he kept the name Scheherazade because it brought to everyone's mind the fairy-tale wonders of Arabian Nights and the East in general.

That Rimsky-Korsakov was able to bring the threads of this new Russian style to fruition in a work like *Scheherazade* was extraordinary given his unorthodox musical training. His first composition teacher Mily Balakirev, had little foundation in theory and set the young Rimsky-Korsakov the task of composing a symphony, leading him painstakingly through the process, hoping he would pick up the craft along the way. This education, such as it was, was further disturbed by the 3-year tour of duty Rimsky-Korsakov undertook on graduation as a naval officer.

On return, he continued to compose in his spare time and spent a good deal of time with the Mighty Handful as they

continued their shared search for a new Russian voice in composition. During this time Rimsky-Korsakov had some critical success with his work and was identified as the most promising, leading to his taking a professorial post at the St Petersburg Conservatory. This move into professionalism alienated Rimsky-Korsakov somewhat from the rest of the group, but it was the move that would guarantee his success as a composer. He said 'Having undeservedly become a Conservatory professor, I soon became one of its best students'. He spent 3 years rigorously studying the fundamentals of composition, as well as benefitting enormously from conducting and providing arrangements for the student orchestra. Alongside this technical work, Rimsky-Korsakov undertook the editing of Glinka's operatic scores and the compilation of two collections of Russian folk songs, projects which provided him with the final piece of the puzzle: a reconnection with the uniquely Russian roots of his style.

When describing *Scheherazade* it's easy to get caught up in flights of fancy about how details of the stories from the Arabian Nights are depicted in the music, but in fact, Rimsky Korsakov achieves the sense of story-telling much more through implication than depiction, and it is this simple approach that is the key to the work's success. He crafts the image of the frame of the Arabian Nights brilliantly, vividly depicting Scheherazade as the solo violin responding to the Sultan portrayed by his theme. However, for the stories she tells, he uses one or two themes to give a sense of the characters in the story and then creates a sense of direction and narrative with variations and combinations of the themes in a purely musical process. For example, the first movement has the subtitle *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship*, but the only really discernible character other than Scheherazade and the Sultan is the sea.

In the transition from the first movement to the second, Rimsky-Korsakov creates the sense of the endless anticipation Scheherazade used in her story telling to stave off execution. He does this again in the simplest possible way. The first movement ends peacefully on an E major chord. The violin enters at the start of the next movement, playing the same music as at the beginning of the first movement, but the key shifts to E minor, a very simple musical device that indicates an absence of resolution and makes us think "But wait, there's more".

This movement is subtitled *The Kalendar prince*, which could be a reference to any one of three such characters in the Arabian Nights: princes who in a typical intervention of fate are reduced to the status of the Kalendar, a wandering mystic who leads an ascetic lifestyle, relying on charity for sustenance. This character is suggested by a solo bassoon, through a combination of mournful double reed sound and eastern style ornamentation of the melody.

We then hear variations of the melody, which increase in energy and tempo, once again a sense of storytelling driven by a purely musical process.

While the Mighty Handful were motivated by rejecting the dominant European approach to composition, Rimsky-Korsakov clearly understood that the basis for the large-scale symphonic development in much of that tradition is the presence of two distinct characters. In this movement Rimsky-Korsakov provides that contrast by bringing in a variant of the sultan's theme. Here it appears as a sort of evil fanfare in the trombone.

The immediate answering of the idea with a very different brass sound again gives the suggestion of a different character in the story, some sort of offside to the main villain. **Rimsky-Korsakov is also playing here with the ambiguity of the tritone. The strings are holding these notes, the tritone, so called because it is 3 tones wide. These two notes on their own don't define a chord and can be interpreted as belonging to this chord or this chord. Refer to Discussion Point 2.** In the following passage the music see-saws between the two possible keys giving a sense of magical transformation.

DISCUSSION POINT 2

Tritone – ‘The Devil’s Interval’. So called for the sense of irresolution between two keys, the tritone is a popular compositional technique employed in classical, jazz and rock music alike. Refer to the *Scheherazade* playlist and explore *Maria* from Bernstein’s *West Side Story* (in which the tritone depicts the whirlwind of first love), Pearl Jam’s *Even Flow* (in which the tritone is the sound of defiance) and Saint-Saens’ *Danse Macabre* (in which the Devil’s interval creates a sustained sense of unease).

The transformation leads us to one of Rimsky-Korsakov’s most novel uses of the orchestra. Part of the Kalendar prince theme appears as a free improvisatory passage in the clarinet. Underneath, Rimsky-Korsakov has the strings continue a steady rhythm of pizzicato chords. Ad libitum solo passages are not uncommon in orchestral repertoire, but to have both free and measured playing happening simultaneously was unheard of at the time.

And once again, variations in character and orchestration form the rest of this movement, culminating in an exhilarating version of the sultan theme that starts as a menacing march and ends up driving headlong to the conclusion.

The third movement is subtitled *The young prince and the young princess*. Once again, the connection with the story extends as far as the theme for the movement being simple and tender. It displays another clear feature of the Russian style: the melody is supported by a harmonic progression that involves the chromatic movement of a single part. You can hear it in the violas and cellos.

At the end of the theme you hear the simple melody give way to some oriental flavour – something that Rimsky-Korsakov exploits as he varies and develops this theme through the movement.

It is in the finale, subtitled *Festival at Baghdad. The Sea. The ship breaks against a cliff*, that we come closest to events being depicted directly by the music. The movement beings dramatically with yet another variation of the Sultan and Scheherazade themes.

After this a scurrying theme based in an eastern sounding scale provides the basis for the depiction of the *Festival at Baghdad*. Variations of this theme proceed to alternate with

recollections of themes from previous movements to create the idea of a kaleidoscope of colour and movement.

Up to this point in the piece Rimsky-Korsakov has clearly depicted Scheherazade’s voice with the solo violin, but has just given the impression of storytelling with his clever use of variations of themes. To bring the sense of storytelling to a dramatic peak he depicts one event from the tales. The music of the *Festival of Baghdad* suddenly gives way to a return of the sea theme from the first movement, but we now hear that it is a stormy and dangerous sea, with the high woodwinds playing fast chromatic scales to sound like tearing winds, giving a dramatic depiction of the ship rushing toward dangerous cliffs.

And then, with a symmetry that brilliantly mirrors archetypal fairy tale shape, **Rimsky-Korsakov completes the piece with the same three elements that appeared at the very beginning, here reversed to give the sense of moving back out of the story world. Scheherazade’s theme is followed by the Sultan’s theme, now completely subdued, as if sleeping (Refer to Discussion Point 3)** before the sequence of magical chords remind us again that we have been in the land of magic and fairy tale.

DISCUSSION POINT 3

Leitmotif. A leitmotif is recurrent theme throughout a musical or literary composition, associated with a particular person, idea, or situation. Scheherazade’s theme is the true leitmotif in this work. Listen to the *Prelude* from Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* in the *Scheherazade* playlist. The opening is one of the most famous examples of leitmotif – an Eb major arpeggio which unfolds, depicting ‘nature’.

Though his orchestration remained essentially conservative, Rimsky-Korsakov’s considered musical experiments within the limits of Romanticism, coupled with those born out of his own vast imagination would have a lasting effect on 20th century composition. His style would directly influence a generation of Russian composers, including Stravinsky and Prokofiev, and more broadly impact the likes of Ravel, Debussy and Respighi. *Scheherazade*’s vivid melodies and lush harmonies evoke a sense of mood, mystery and adventure, which continue to fascinate and bewitch audiences more than 130 years after the work was first heard.

PLAYLIST LINK: [Spotify](#)

CREATIVE COMPOSITION ACTIVITY:

- Create your own leitmotif – does it depict a person, a place or a concept? Develop a short piece in which the leitmotif regularly reappears
- Can you work a tritone into your leitmotif?
- Perform or record this for an audience – can they identify your leitmotif?

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