Rimsky-Korsakov - Symphony No. 2 ‘Antar’ - Scheherezade (2012)

Symphony No. 2, Op. 9, "Antar" *1. I. Largo - Allegro - Largo - Allegretto - Adagio - Allegretto - Largo 09:36 2. II. Allegro 04:16 3. III. Allegro risoluto 05:15 4. IV. Allegretto - Adagio 09:15* St. Petersburg State Symphony Orchestra Andre Anichanov - conductor Scheherazade, Op. 35 *5. I. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship 10:44 6. II. The Kalender Prince 11:33 7. III. The Young Prince and the Young Princess 10:44 8. IV. Festival at Baghdad - The Sea 12:51* Seattle Symphony Orchestra Gerard Schwarz - conductor

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov had a work ethic that bordered on the obsessive, and when inspiration failed him, he would often busy himself by tidying up works from his youth. This habit accounts for the proliferation of versions of Antar. This work was composed between January and August 1868, and premiered in March of the next year. After a few alterations, it was published in 1880 as his Second Symphony. However, in the "new edition" of 1903, which was dated 1897, "Antar" was substantially revised and called a symphonic suite, with the words Second Symphony in a parenthetical subtitle. In 1913, a final version of Antar came out, called simply a "Symphonic Suite," as Rimsky-Korsakov had decided that Antar was "a poem, suite, fairy tale, story, anything you like, but not a symphony." The final version changes the key of the second movement and has more refined and detailed orchestration. However, the earlier version may best preserve the freshness of Rimsky-Korsakov's response to the myth of Antar, a great warrior from Arabian literature.

Rimsky-Korsakov's program opens with Antar wandering the ruins of the ancient desert city of Palmyra. Rimsky-Korsakov portrays the desert with grim, bare woodwind chords and elusive, chromatic fragments of melody sweeping over them. Antar's theme enters on the strings, in a lush, resigned harmonization, as he has come to the desert to renounce humanity. Suddenly, a beautiful gazelle appears, which Antar chases. A huge black bird swoops down on the gazelle, but Antar repels it with his lance. He then falls asleep, and in his dream he meets the Queen of Palmyra, Gul Nazar, who had taken the form of the gazelle that Antar saved. The Queen is

represented by a lovely, winding wind theme. Gul Nazar promises Antar the three joys of life in exchange for his good deed; as Antar contemplates his newfound good fortune, he wakes up to the strains of the harp and the Gul Nazar theme, amid the ruins of Palmyra. So ends the first movement. The second and third movements are devoted to depicting the joys of revenge and power, respectively. Rimsky-Korsakov uses nervous tremolos in the strings and puts the Antar theme in defiant brass to suggest revenge, while the Antar theme is played sweetly on the strings and in fanfares by the brass to depict power. In the last movement, Antar is allowed to experience the ultimate joy, the love of Gul Nazar. He insists that she kill him when she feels his passion cooling; this she does, and Antar dies in her arms. This movement features some of Rimsky-Korsakov's finest orchestration, including transcendently poignant blends in the woodwinds which depict the two lovers as their passion swells and fades, ultimately ascending to heaven on a swirling harp and lying to rest with a few final chords. Anyone who enjoys Scheherazade should try Antar next, as this symphony is almost as inspired as that peak of Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic oeuvre. --- Andrew Lindemann Malone, Rovi

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's works are distinguished by his colorful and imaginative orchestration, and Scheherazade is perhaps the finest example of them all (Claude Debussy, no slouch of an orchestrator himself, paid Scheherazade the highest compliment by using a passage from its second movement, virtually unaltered, in both La mer and Daphnis et Chloe). Scheherazade's gorgeous melodies and vast, impeccably employed palette of orchestral colors have made it Rimsky-Korsakov's most popular work.

Rimsky-Korsakov's headnote explains the scenario: "The Sultan Schahriar, persuaded of the falseness and faithlessness of women, has sworn to put to death each one of his wives after the first night. But the Sultana Scheherazade saved her life by interesting him in tales she told him during 1,001 nights. Pricked by curiosity, the Sultan put off his wife's execution from day to day, and at last gave up entirely his bloody plan." Four such lifesaving narratives, rendered in music, follow. In later years, Rimsky-Korsakov declared that Scheherazade should be regarded as a symphonic suite with an unspecified Oriental program. This makes sense in light of the fact that the music itself has very little narrative logic. However, some details of the program remain relevant.

The first movement, titled The Sea and Sinbad's Ship, opens with the growling chords that represent the Sultan, followed by the sinuous solo violin melody that depicts Scheherazade weaving her tales. Scheherazade recedes, and a swaying melody enters in barcarole time on the strings, swelling like the sea. Brass accents occasionally cause the sea to crash and storm,

and sweetly scored interludes suggest island dalliances, but the movement ends with a quiet depiction of what must be calm seas and steady wind.

The Story of the Kalender Prince concerns a prince who disguises himself as a beggar and searches for wisdom. His melancholy theme first appears in solo woodwinds, then enters the strings and quickens as the Prince sets out on his journey. Rimsky-Korsakov suggested that "one might see a fight" when a martial variant of the Sultan's theme enters, surrounded by nervous string oscillations, while a later section with fluttering woodwinds and pizzicato string chords suggests "Sinbad's mighty bird, the Roc."

The third movement is called The Prince and the Princess and explores an unnamed Eastern palace; the Prince appears as a sensual, langorous string theme, the Princess as a relaxed arc of flute melody. Nevertheless, the beginning of the fourth movement finds the Sultan in an irascible mood, and Scheherazade tries to appease him by describing the restless energy of the festival at Baghdad. From there, the action moves out to the sea, where the weather has worsened. Brass cry out, winds sweep up and down, and the music grows to a massive climax topped by a frightening bitonal crash depicting the ship striking rocks and sinking. The storm subsides, and finally the themes of Scheherazade and the Sultan mingle, Scheherazade's violin playing its highest harmonics. --- Andrew Lindemann Malone

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