Nikolai Rimski-Korsakov – Scheherezade (1969)



1. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship (Largo maestoso — Allegro non troppo) 2. The tale of Prince Kalendar (Lento — Andantino) 3. The Young Prince and The Young Princess (Andantino quasi allegretto) (4. The Festival at Baghdad - The Ship Breaks on the rock of Bronze Horseman. (Allegro molto e frenetico Allegro non troppo e maestoso — Lento) Heinrich Friedheim, solo violin USSR State Symphony Orchestra Evgeny Svetlanov - conductor Recorded in 1969

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, Rovi

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