Rimsky-Korsakov – Symphonic Works (1994)

CD 1: *Scheherazade May night - overture The tale of Tsar Saltan - suite, op.57* CD 2: *Russian Easter festival overture, op.36 Christmas eve - suite Dubinushka, op.62 Sadko - musical picture, op.5 The snow maiden - suite **
Motet Choir of Geneva * L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande Ernest Ansermet – conductor

Heard beside recordings by Golovanov (Boheme, 1950s original) and Svetlanov this Ansermet Sheherazade is softly lit and softly focused. If you find the Soviets just a shade too relentless and neon then this might be for you. It's undoubtedly effective and Ansermet even coaxes a nice bray from the Paris Conservatoire brass or perhaps it was endemic in those days. Nerini is a very neat soloist but does not have the extraordinary seductive and scudding glamour of Oistrakh for Golovanov. The recording from 1954 is very good and way better than the ancient sounding Golovanov. Even so its steely core is beginning to show through. Ansermet is very good but not a match for the volcanic Russian. There's a charming yet understated May Night overture to match up with a rather engaging Tsar Saltan suite the march of which must surely have formed a model for Prokofiev's march in The Love of Three Oranges.

On the second CD is the Russian Easter Festival Overture but despite being most lovingly recorded Ansermet favours an overly steady approach the etiolated results of which have great charm but little bite. The Christmas Eve suite is magically done with some hushed and tense playing captured upfront in classically virile sound from Decca. A pity that the whole suite is presented in a single track. The Dubinushka is extremely nicely done: folk-cheery with some notably pointed trumpet work. It's an artefact of those same revolutionary times when Rimsky, at the cost of his job, sided with the students of the St Petersburg Conservatoire at the time of the ill-fated 1905 revolution. Sadko is tempestuous and is superbly done here with - once again - recording to match. Ansermet provides a buzzing performance replete with slavonic melancholy and fairytale enchantment. Note the beguilingly lissom cantabile at 3.49 onwards. The musical picture is no longer than a concert overture and rises to a wild dance worthy of the Polovtsi though on this occasion sub-oceanic. The Snow Maiden suite is in four movements - all

in a single track. With its foreshadowing of Bax's Garden of Fand this is most magically done and the Danse des Oiseaux is finely picked out by a slightly distanced Motet de Genève choir who achieve a nicely authentic Russian accent recalling the celebratory sections of Rachmaninov's The Bells. The suite ends with the sparkling Danses des Bouffons with a dervish Tchaikovskian whirl to it.

Lower key Rimsky-Korsakov which may well suit you. It's often very nicely recorded. --- Rob Barnett, musicweb-international.com

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