

Rimsky-Korsakov

# Scheherazade

Capriccio espagnol  
Neapolitan Song



Carlo Ponti

Russian National Orchestra

**Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844 – 1908)

### **Scheherazade Op. 35** (1888)

#### **Symphonic Suite after “A Thousand and One Nights”**

1 The Sea and Sindbad's ship

10.13

2 The Tale of Prince Kalendar

12.42

3 The Young Prince and the Young Princess

10.25

4 The Festival at Baghdad; The Sea; The Shipwreck

12.59

(The ship smashes into a cliff surmounted by a bronze horseman)

Tatiana Porshneva, violin

### **Capriccio espagnol Op. 34** (1887)

5 Alborada

1.21

6 Variazioni

4.44

7 Alborada (reprise)

1.21

8 Scena e canto gitano

4.57

9 Fandango asturiano

3.25

Alexei Bruni, violin

### **Neapolitan Song Op. 63** (1907)

3.39

Arrangement of “Funiculi, funiculà” by Luigi Denza (1846 – 1922)

## **Russian National Orchestra**

conducted by: **Carlo Ponti**

Recording venue DZZ Studio 5, Moscow (6/2010)

Executive producers: Rick Walker & Job Maarse

Recording producer: Job Maarse

Balance engineer: Erdo Groot

Recording engineer: Roger de Schot

Editing: Ientje Mooij

**Total playing time: 66.10**

The last three symphonies by Pjotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky are classic examples of the Russian symphonic tradition. However, although these works definitely contain Russian elements, the critics who claim that Tchaikovsky was first influenced and moulded by the German and French styles are certainly correct. The truly Russian style was not so much developed by Tchaikovsky as by the composers of the so-called “Mighty Handful” (or the “Mighty Five”).

Michael Glinka staged the first Russian folk drama with his opera *Ivan Susanin* and astonished the audience in St. Petersburg at the première. The work was labelled “coachman’s” music, yet although the term was intended as an insult, Glinka felt highly flattered: “This was excellently phrased, and even very true; for, in my opinion, coachmen are smarter than the aristocracy”. And that provided the upbeat to a new musical movement, in which folk music would form the basis for the music written for the opera and the concert hall. To quote Glinka again: “The people create the music, and we composers simply arrange it”. Although Glinka is known principally as a composer of opera, he also contributed to the field of symphonic music. An example of this is his orchestral fantasia *Kamarinskaya*, in which he assimilated two Russian folk-songs. Of all people, it was Tchaikovsky who was full of praise for this piece, and who even went so far as to say that “all of the Russian symphonic school is contained in Glinka’s *Kamarinskaya*, just as all of an oak tree is in an acorn”.

The fact that Glinka was a self-educated man was sufficient reason for his colleague, Mili Balakirev, to forego any official musical training. Balakirev believed that Russian music should be capable of developing independently, free from western influences and academic rigidity. As such, he took the opposite stance to Anton Rubinstein, who had founded a conservatoire in St. Petersburg in 1861, based mainly on a Germanic pattern. The group of composers who joined Balakirev went down in history as the “Mighty Handful”. They consisted of Alexander Borodin, César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. None of these composers had undergone professional training, and they all also worked in other professions alongside music.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov first came into contact with music while training to become a navy cadet. In 1857, the young man attended his first opera, and two years later he was deeply impressed after hearing two symphonies by Beethoven, an overture by Mendelssohn and Glinka’s *Jota Aragonesa*. He decided to take piano lessons from Théodore Canille, and also began to study the principles of the theory of music. In December 1861, Canille introduced him to Balakirev, Cui and Mussorgsky. Although Rimsky-Korsakov had hardly undergone any formal musical training, Balakirev still encouraged his young colleague to

further elaborate his sketches for a symphony. As he was still serving in the navy, he did not manage to complete this work until 1865. The symphony received its première on December 31 that year in the Free School for Music founded by Balakirev in St. Petersburg. Later, Rimsky-Korsakov was sorry that Balakirev had not taught him even the basic principles of counterpoint and harmony, and admitted that, in his first symphony, he had in fact done no more than imitate as closely as possible the examples given by Schumann, Glinka and Balakirev. Nevertheless, César Cui defined the work as the “first Russian symphony”.

In his orchestral works, Rimsky-Korsakov elaborated on Glinka’s ideas, and often used material from Russian folk music as his departure point. This material provided him with as yet untapped possibilities in the fields of composition technique and orchestration. Thus a group of compositions came about, among which his *Overture on Three Russian Themes*, his *Fantasia on Serbian themes*, his *Concert Fantasia on Russian Themes* for violin and orchestra, his *Capriccio Espagnol* and his *Russian Easter Festival Overture*.

Rimsky-Korsakov wrote his *Capriccio Espagnol* in the summer of 1887, after completing the orchestration of Borodin’s opera, *Prince Igor*, which had been left unfinished due to the death of its composer. In the meantime, Rimsky-Korsakov had developed into a master-orchestrator, and his music was known for its unprecedented use of the timbres of the various instruments. The *Capriccio Espagnol*, a sparkling showpiece with “breath-taking orchestral tones”, is a true example of his capacities. “The Spanish themes, with a dancing character, provided me with rich material with which to create colourful orchestral effects,” the composer wrote. During the first rehearsal, the orchestral musicians were so overwhelmed that they burst out into spontaneous applause on various occasions. And during the première, the conductor was forced to repeat the work. Nevertheless, Rimsky-Korsakov remained critical towards his own music. Later, he even classified his *Capriccio Espagnol* as “superficial”, although he was absolutely aware of his extraordinary skills in the field of orchestration. In his *Chronicle of my musical life*, dating from 1909, he wrote: “The opinion held by critics and audiences alike that the *Capriccio* is a magnificently orchestrated piece, is incorrect. The *Capriccio* is a brilliant composition for orchestra. The alternation of timbres, the fortunate choice of melodies and figurative patterns, which match each instrument precisely, the short, virtuoso cadenzas for solo instruments, the rhythm of the percussion instruments etc. are what determine the essence of the composition – not its ‘coating’, i.e. the orchestration”.

Apart from the compositions based on Russian folk melodies, Rimsky-Korsakov also wrote a group of works that do not contain any trace of folk music. These works, with on the whole poetic titles such

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as *Sadko*, *Antar*, *Skazka* and *Scheherazade*, have a programmatic background, and can be seen as a Russian answer to the symphonic poems by Franz Liszt. Thus, for example, Rimsky-Korsakov's Symphony No. 2 (*Antar*) is the synthesis of a symphony with a symphonic poem. And it is conspicuous that in the last of the three versions the composer no longer calls the work a "symphony", but a "symphonic suite". He writes as follows: "At the time, the term 'suite' was not widespread in our circles. In the West-European music literature it appears only sporadically. Nevertheless, I should not have classified *Antar* as a symphony. The work is a poem, a suite, a fairytale, a story of whatever, but certainly not a symphony. The only thing it has in common with a symphony, is the external form and the division into four movements". The reason that the composer did not want to call the work a symphony was that the piece is not composed according to the formal structure of the symphony. The work is far more episodic in its layout, in which the music follows the events in the story of Osip Senkovsky, on which the work is based.

Immediately following the *Capriccio Espagnol*, Rimsky-Korsakov began work on a new symphonic work, likewise based on an oriental tale: *Scheherazade*. This time, he called the work a "symphonic suite" from the start. To quote the composer, *Scheherazade* is a "kaleidoscope of fairytale images and patterns with an oriental character". In order to guide the listener's imagination, he had the following programme printed on the title page of the score: "Convinced of the treachery and faithlessness of the female gender, sultan Shahriar swore to put each of his wives to death following their wedding night. However, sultana Scheherazade managed to save her own life. She bewitched the sultan with her stories during a thousand and one nights. Due to curiosity, the sultan delayed her execution day after day, until he finally abandoned his bloody plan. Scheherazade told him of wondrous matters, quoted poetry, texts or folk songs, and interwove the stories".

The suite consists of four movements. Originally, the composer planned to give the movements abstract titles: *Prelude*, *Ballade*, *Adagio* and *Finale*, but at the insistence of Anatol Liadov, among others, he finally chose to give them more descriptive titles: *The sea and Sindbad's ship*; *The tale of Prince Kalendar*; *The young prince and the young princess*; *Festival in Baghdad – The sea – The shipwreck* (The ship smashes into a cliff surmounted by a bronze horseman). Nevertheless, Rimsky-Korsakov was not happy with these titles. He preferred the listener to experience his music as absolute music, and to be left with the feeling that the work was "an oriental tale of numerous, varied fairytale-like miracles, and not just four movements played in a row, and composed on themes that appear in all four movements". The musical cohesion is formed by the passages of the solo violin – at times accompanied by the harp – that

provide a portrayal of Scheherazade. The forbidding and monumental introductory theme of the piece is often linked to the character of the sultan. However, this is incorrect, as the theme also appears in other places in the work where the sultan is not involved in the storyline. In his *Chronicle*, Rimsky-Korsakov explains that people search to no avail for "leitmotifs that are linked consistently to a certain poetic idea, or to certain images. On the contrary, in the majority of cases, these so-called leitmotifs are simply musical building blocks, motifs in the symphonic elaboration. They pass by and spread themselves throughout all the movements of the work. They follow one another and become entangled. Time and again, they appear in another light, they sketch other features, express other situations. Time and again, they refer to other images and scenes".

A conspicuous element of *Scheherazade* is its oriental colouring. In a great deal of music from this period – certainly in Russia – composers include elements from the music of the Caucasians and the Tartars, as well as the Turks, Arabs, Indians and Persians. This is used as a musical symbol for what is foreign and threatening, or on the contrary, what is



wondrous and fairytale-like. Various aspects of this oriental style include lengthy wisps of melody (melismas), melodies with many grace notes, small intervals, bourdon tones and the use of woodwind solos and colourful percussion. All these elements are present in *Scheherazade*.

Rimsky-Korsakov completed his actual symphonic oeuvre with his *Capriccio Espagnol*, *Scheherazade* and *Russian Easter Festival Overture*, also dating from 1888. Later in life, he wrote of this period as an apprenticeship for the operas that he would subsequently compose: "The *Capriccio Espagnol*, *Scheherazade* and the *Russian Easter Festival Overture* concluded that period of my work, in which I acquired – without the influence of Wagner and within the limitations of the usual Glinka-orchestra – a respectable virtuosity in dealing with the orchestra in a transparent manner, aimed at the beauty of the sound. Furthermore, these three works clearly demonstrate the decline of contrapuntal passage work, which I had already initiated in the *Snow Maiden*. The counterpoint is increasingly superseded by a rich, virtuoso figurative passage work, which especially now makes my works technically interesting".

This change in style and technique can certainly be traced back to a period of private study undertaken by the composer in 1897. His job as "Inspector of Naval Bands" enabled him to study the intricacies of the various wind instruments. As a consequence, he began writing an extensive treatise on instrumentation and orchestration; a work he more than once put aside and that remained unfinished at his death. He put the results of his study to use in the operas he later wrote, as well as in the orchestral works from this period. These consist mainly of orchestral suites taken from his operas, as well as of a number of shorter works. Thus a year before his death, Rimsky-Korsakov returned to the southern sounds of the Mediterranean: this time, to Italy, with an arrangement for orchestra of the popular song *Funiculì, funiculá* by Luigi Denza, which was composed to commemorate the opening of the first funicular railway to the top of the Vesuvius. In this short arrangement, once again, every bar rings with the brilliance of the master-orchestrator, Rimsky-Korsakov.

## Carlo Ponti

Carlo Ponti began his musical studies in Paris as a pianist and subsequently attended the Conductor's Institute in Hartford, Connecticut. He holds a master's degree in conducting from the University of California, Los Angeles and has also studied with Maestros Zubin Mehta, Mehli Mehta, Andrey Boreyko and Harold Farberman, and under Leopold Hager and Erwin Accel at the Vienna Musikhochschule.

Ponti's critically praised debut with the Russian National Orchestra in Moscow led to his appointment in 2000 as the Orchestra's Associate Conductor. In 2001, Ponti was named Music Director and Principal Conductor of the San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra in the United States, a position recently extended through the 2014/2015 season.

As a guest conductor, Ponti has appeared with, among others, the Orquesta Sinfonica de Galicia, Orquesta de Valencia, Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra, Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg, Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Pro Arte Orchestra, Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, Ural Philharmonic, Moscow Chamber Orchestra, Budapest Concert Orchestra, and Napa Valley Symphony.

He has conducted at numerous international music festivals, including the Festival d'Echternach, Festival Vancouver, Taichung Music Festival, Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Bratislava Spring Music Festival, St. Petersburg Palaces Music Festival, Festival Internacional de Musica de Villena, Napa Valley Festival del Sole, Tuscan Sun Festival, Lake Tahoe Music Festival, and the Köln Musik Triennale.

Committed to encouraging and educating young talent, Ponti holds regular master classes in orchestral conducting and has led the American Youth Symphony Orchestra.

Following his critically acclaimed debut with the Orchestra del Maggio Musicale in Florence, Maestro Ponti was awarded Italy's prestigious Premio Galileo Award in 2006 for exceptional musical achievement. In the United States, he was the recipient of the 2008 Artistic Achievement Award from the Virginia Waring International Piano Competition for his contributions to the development and advancement of young musical talent throughout the world.

## Russian National Orchestra

The Russian National Orchestra has been in demand throughout the music world ever since its 1990 Moscow premiere. Of the orchestra's 1996 debut at the BBC Proms in London, the *Evening Standard* wrote, "They played with such captivating beauty that the audience gave an involuntary sigh of pleasure. More recently, they were described as "a living symbol of the best in Russian art" (*Miami Herald*) and "as close to perfect as one could hope for" (*Trinity Mirror*).

The first Russian orchestra to perform at the Vatican and in Israel, the RNO maintains an active international tour schedule, appearing in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Guest artists performing with the RNO on tour include conductors Vladimir Jurowski, Nicola Luisotti, Antonio

Pappano, Alan Gilbert, Carlo Ponti and Patrick Summers, and soloists Martha Argerich, Yefim Bronfman, Lang Lang, Pinchas Zukerman, Sir James Galway, Joshua Bell, Itzhak Perlman, Steven Isserlis, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Simone Kermes and Renée Fleming, among many others. Popular with radio audiences worldwide, RNO concerts are regularly aired by National Public Radio in the United States and by the European Broadcasting Union.

*Gramophone magazine* called the first RNO CD (1991) "an awe-inspiring experience; should human beings be able to play like this?" and listed it as the best recording of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* in history. Since then, the orchestra has made more than 60 recordings for Deutsche Grammophon and PentaTone Classics, distinguishing the RNO as the only Russian ensemble with long-standing relationships with these prestigious labels, as well as additional discs with many other record companies. Conductors represented in the RNO discography include Founder and Music Director Mikhail Pletnev, Principal Guest Conductor Vladimir Jurowski, Kent Nagano, Alexander Vedernikov and Paavo Berglund.

The RNO's recording of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* and Beintus's *Wolf Tracks*, conducted by Kent Nagano and narrated by Sophia Loren, Bill Clinton and Mikhail Gorbachev, received a 2004 Grammy Award,

making the RNO the first Russian orchestra to win the recording industry's highest honor. A Spanish language version narrated by Antonio Banderas was released in 2007, following a Russian version narrated by actors Oleg Tabakov and Sergei Bezrukov, with Mandarin and other editions to follow.

The orchestra's Shostakovich cycle on PentaTone Classics is widely acclaimed as "the most exciting cycle of the Shostakovich symphonies to be put down on disc, and easily the best recorded". (*SACD.net*)

A regular visitor to the Schleswig-Holstein, Gstaad and Rheingau festivals, the RNO is also the founding orchestra of Napa Valley Festival del Sole, Festival of the Arts BOCA in Florida, and the Singapore Sun Festival, and resident orchestra for multiple seasons of the Tuscan Sun Festival in Cortona, Italy. The RNO will launch its own annual festival in 2009, which will be held at Moscow's Bolshoi Theater.

The RNO is unique among the principal Russian ensembles as a private institution funded with the support of individuals, corporations and foundations in Russia and throughout the world. In recognition of both its artistry and path-breaking structure, the Russian Federation recently awarded the RNO the first ever grant to a non-government orchestra.



