

WEST VALLEY SYMPHONY

NOVEMBER 12, 2023

RUSSIAN REVERIES

PROGRAM NOTES

Dmitri Kabalevsky (1904-1987) was born in St. Petersburg and began studying music in Moscow at age 14, eventually becoming a professor of composition at the Moscow Conservatory. His music served to interpret the political and social ideals of the Soviet Union, which helped him steer clear of the charges of “formalism” and decadence which tormented his colleagues Prokofiev, Shostakovich and many others. His music is highly expressive and easy to understand. Although very prolific, and highly respected in the Soviet Union, today his music is largely forgotten, save the suite from *The Comedians* and the overture from his 1937 opera, *Colas Breugnon*. The opera was based on the novel by Romain Rolland, and the tunes were modeled on French folksongs. Some of them were used for this exuberant, exciting overture.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) was by any measure one of the greatest composers ever. He wrote masterpieces in virtually every genre he tackled: symphonies, operas, concertos, chamber music, ballet, even film music. No other twentieth-century composer has had as much of his music accepted into the repertoire. He was also a first-rate pianist who concertized the world over. Like many other pianists of the past, he wrote concertos for his own use, and yet of his five piano concertos, only the third has achieved sustained popularity, the other four are only rarely presented. The Third Concerto is the only one of his concertos written in the standard form of three movements. It has great tunes, exceptional even by Prokofiev’s lofty standards. The first movement is written in a modified sonata form where the development and recapitulation are practically combined. The second movement is a theme with five variations based on a catchy tune. The finale is in the form of a rondo.

Prokofiev began working on the concerto in 1913, but didn’t finish it until 1921 while living in France. That year was a very fruitful one for the composer, with successful premiers of the ballet *The Buffoon* and the opera *The Love of Three Oranges*. He retreated that summer to St. Brevin-les-Pins, a village on the Brittany coast, along with his mother and an old friend, Boris Bashkirov. While there, the composer completed what would become his most popular piano concerto. The composer had a strict routine of work and exercise: “I get up at 8:30, put on a collarless shirt, white pants and rope-soled sandals,” he wrote in a letter. “... After drinking hot chocolate, I look to see if the garden is still where it’s supposed to be. Then I sit down to work: I’m writing the Third Piano Concerto. Lunch is at 12:30. One glass of St. Rafael, no more. At two, we have a game of chess...”

One of his summer neighbors was poet Konstantin Balmont, for whom Prokofiev played the concerto. The poet was so impressed by the new work that he was inspired to write a sonnet. In return, Prokofiev dedicated the concerto to Balmont.

The first performance was given on December 16, 1921, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Frederick Stock with the composer as the pianist. "My Third Concerto has turned out to be devilishly difficult. I'm nervous and I'm practicing hard three hours a day," he wrote to Natalia Koussevitsky. Chicago critics and audiences received the concerto warmly but not ecstatically. Its true stature and popularity were realized after being heard in Europe, where the audiences were more familiar with modern music. The first recording was made in 1932 with the London Symphony, and again Prokofiev was the soloist.

For **Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844- 1908), orchestral color was a vitally important characteristic of music. He wrote his three most famous orchestral works: *Capriccio Espagnol*, *Scheherazade*, and *Russian Easter Overture*, in 1887-1888 and recognized his own significant achievement, writing in his autobiography *My Musical Life*: "...my orchestration had reached a considerable degree of virtuosity and bright sonority without Wagner's influence..." And indeed, the present work *Scheherazade*, op. 35 is a vividly colored display of orchestral wizardry.

Rimsky wrote, "The program I had been guided by in composing *Scheherazade* consisted of separate, unconnected episodes and pictures from *The Arabian Nights*, scattered through all four movements of my suite: the sea and Sinbad's ship, the fantastic narrative of the Prince Kalendar, the Prince and the Princess, the Baghdad Festival, and the ship dashing against the rock with the bronze rider upon it. The unifying thread consisted of the brief introductions to the first, second, and fourth movements and the intermezzo in movement three, written for solo violin and delineating Scheherazade herself as telling her wondrous tales to the stern Sultan. The final conclusion of movement four serves the same artistic purpose."

Scheherazade was completed during the summer of 1888 at Nyezhgovitsky. Originally, the composer labeled the movements as 1) Prelude, 2) Ballade, 3) Adagio, 4) Finale. But Anatoly Lyadov, a composition student of Rimsky-Korsakov and others convinced him to offer the listener a better, less mundane guide. Rimsky agreed, and re-titled them: 1) The Sea and Sinbad's Ship, 2) The Tale of the Prince Kalendar, 3) The Young Prince and the Young Princess, 4) Festival at Baghdad, The Sea, The Ship Goes to Pieces Against a Rock Surmounted by a Bronze Warrior, Conclusion.

"In composing *Scheherazade* I meant these hints to direct but slightly the hearer's fancy on the path which my own fancy had travelled...All I had desired was that the hearer, if he liked my piece as symphonic music, should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale

wonders.” And so, in the final edition of the score, Rimsky removed even these titles, and attached the following:

“The Sultan Schahryar, persuaded of the falseness and faithlessness of women, has sworn to put to death each one of his wives after the first night. But Sultana Scheherazade saved her life by interesting him in tales which she told him during one thousand and one 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...”

The score was dedicated to Vladimir Stasov, the influential critic who was partially responsible for creating the Russian Nationalist school of composition. The work received its first performance on October 28, 1888, at St. Petersburg under the composer’s direction.

~ Marty Haub