

San Juan Symphony
February 23-24, 2019
Program Notes
by Michael Allsen

Fantasy and fairy tales have long served as the inspiration for great music. We begin with the colorful *Mother Goose Suite* by Ravel, an imaginative musical retelling of five beloved children's stories. Rimsky-Korsakov similarly transformed the fantastic imagery of *The Thousand and One Nights*, the great Arabic collection of tales, into one of his finest works, *Scheherazade*. And in the same vein, Shakespeare's great tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* inspired Tchaikovsky to create one of his most popular works.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Mother Goose Suite

Ravel composed the *Mother Goose Suite* (*Ma Mère l'Oye*) in 1910 as a duet for two young piano students, Mimi and Jean Godebski, the children of his friends Cipa and Ida Godebski. Although Ravel's original intention, that this music serve as an incentive for the children to practice, apparently failed with Mimi and Jean—Mimi was especially obstinate—the piece was soon performed in a recital by two students at the Paris Conservatoire, Christine Verger, age six, and Germaine Duramy, age ten. In 1911, the choreographer Jeanne Hugard asked Ravel to produce a ballet score, and he orchestrated the five movements, together with a newly-composed prelude and interludes. He later extracted the five original movements as an orchestral suite.

The *Mother Goose* tales were first published in 1697 by Charles Perrault, though there were many later additions to the collection. They were as well-known in Ravel's time as they are today, and he drew on five of the most beloved stories for his pieces. The first movement, *Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty* is only 20 measures long, but it concentrates a great deal of grace and beauty into that small space. A quiet evocation of an ancient processional dance, its melody is carried mostly by solo woodwinds above a quiet string and harp background.

Before the second movement, *Tom Thumb*, Ravel places a brief quotation from *Ma Mère l'Oye* to set the scene:

“He thought that he could easily find his way home by the bread crumbs that he had dropped along the path, but he was very surprised when he found that he could not find a single crumb—birds had eaten them all.”

Ravel creates a sense of bewilderment and searching with a background of constantly-shifting meter, and a plaintive melody passed from one instrument to another. The birds themselves chirp and twitter near the end as they gobble up the crumbs.

The third movement, *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*, also begins with a quotation:

“She undressed herself and went into the bath. The *pagodes* and *pagodines* began to sing and play on instruments. Some had oboes made of walnut shells and others had violas

made of almond shells—for they had to have instruments that were of their own small proportions.”

This one needs some explanation. A *pagoda* was a Chinese figurine with a grotesque face and a movable head—a popular decorating accessory in 18th-century France. In the story, Laideronnette is a Chinese princess who has been cursed with horrible ugliness and who wanders for years, her only companion an equally-ugly green serpent. Eventually they are shipwrecked in the island of the *pagodas*, those little porcelain people, who take her as their queen. In the end, she marries the serpent (a handsome prince in disguise...of course), and they both get magical makeovers and return to their former good-looking selves. Ravel’s use of pentatonic melodies and the prominence of the glockenspiel, gong, and xylophone give this movement a uniquely Eastern feel.

The fourth movement is titled *The Conversations of the Beauty and the Beast*. Here Ravel includes a pair of dialogues from the story:

“When I think of how good-hearted you are, you do not seem to me to be so ugly.”

“Yes, indeed—I have a good heart, but I am still a monster.”

“There are many men more monstrous than you.”

“If I were smart enough, I would invent a fine compliment to thank you, but I am only a beast.”

—

“Beauty, will you be my wife?”

“No, Beast!”

“Then I die content, having the pleasure of seeing you again.”

“No, dear Beast, you shall not die—you shall live to be my husband!”

In Ravel’s setting, the clarinet takes the part of Beauty, with a lovely lilting waltz, while the Beast is characterized by a grotesque contrabassoon theme. When Beauty declares her love, their melodies are combined. There is a magical moment created between the harp and triangle, whereupon the Beast reappears in the solo violin, showing that he has been transformed to his former state, a handsome prince (of course!)

The final movement, *The Fairy Garden*, is a set of free variations on a slow and lyrical melody presented by the strings. In the 1911 ballet score, Ravel describes this movement as an “apotheosis”—a slow procession of the Prince and Princess through the Fairy Godmother’s garden. The movement closes, suitably, with wedding bells.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) ***Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy***

The works of Shakespeare were the basis for dozens of Romantic operas and large instrumental pieces that have survived in today’s concert repertoire, but the most popular of these is probably Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The idea for this large orchestral work based on Shakespeare’s most famous drama came from Tchaikovsky’s contemporary Mily Balakirev. Tchaikovsky was just beginning his career in the 1860s, and Balakirev was the leader of an influential group of

Russian nationalist composers known as the “Mighty Five.” In 1868, he dedicated an overture titled *Fate* to Balakirev. While *Fate* was a complete flop—Tchaikovsky later destroyed the score—it was the beginning of a close friendship, and Balakirev encouraged him to take *Romeo and Juliet* as a subject, even suggesting the programmatic structure of the overture. The subject of a tragic love affair may in fact have been on Tchaikovsky’s mind at the time. He had been infatuated with a soprano named Désirée Artôt, who had just married someone else, and his brother later suggested that the overture grew out of unresolved feelings for Vladimir Gerard, a friend from several years earlier. Tchaikovsky was typically insecure during the overture’s composition, writing at one point, “I’m beginning to fear that my muse has flown off.” Balakirev reviewed the work at every stage of its composition, and after some initial criticisms, wrote of his enthusiastic approval: “I am impatient to receive the entire score so that I may get a just impression of your clever overture, which is—so far—your best work. That you have dedicated it to me gives me the greatest pleasure.” The first performance in 1870 was unsuccessful, and Tchaikovsky revised the work, incorporating several of Balakirev’s suggestions. He revised it once more a decade later—the version that is familiar today—in particular reworking the dramatic ending.

Though *Romeo and Juliet* has a conventional sonata form, Tchaikovsky clearly intended it to be understood in programmatic terms. The solemn theme of the introduction represents Friar Lawrence, whose good-hearted efforts at matchmaking are swept away by the feud between the Montagues and Capulets. The introduction becomes gradually more intense until it finally explodes into the first main theme, an agitated figure that vividly recalls the bloody vendetta between the families of the two lovers. The sweeping second theme, first hinted at by the English horn, represents the lovers themselves and their passion. (This melody has, of course become a virtual musical cliché for romantic love!) These two themes are placed in opposition throughout the overture, with occasional mediation by the “Friar Lawrence” theme—mediation that will be to no avail, as the lovers are destined to die a tragic death. In the coda, there is a funeral benediction by Friar Lawrence and a last dirge-like version of the love theme, before the overture comes to an abrupt and strident ending.

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) ***Scheherazade* Symphonic Suite, Op. 35**

The Thousand and One Nights is a collection of Arabic and Egyptian stories dating from as early as the 10th century. Framing the collection is the story of the Sultan Shahryar who, convinced of the infidelity of all women, puts his wives to death one by one until the Princess Scheherazade distracts him by telling him one fantastic tale after another—one each night for 1001 nights—until the Sultan eventually ends his murderous plot. There are many versions of *The Thousand and One Nights*, but most of the stories, including the Voyages of Sinbad and the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, were considered a collection by the 15th century. Still some tales, including the story of Aladdin, were added even later. Nineteenth-century readers were fascinated by exotic settings and fairy tales, and the “Arabian Nights” was perfect subject matter—stories of love, humor, bravery, and magic. To be sure, most European, American, and Russian readers knew the collection only through carefully-edited translations that avoided the more explicit parts and accentuated the fairy tale aspects. (An exception was the unexpurgated English translation published by Francis Burton in 1885, a highly controversial book for its time.) The tales have served as the basis for innumerable works of art, literature, dance and

music. The most powerful musical treatment is certainly Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral suite *Scheherazade*, which was composed in 1888.

Rimsky-Korsakov, the great Russian nationalist and leading teacher at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, first conceived of a work on stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* in the winter of 1887 while working on his completion of Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*. He finished *Scheherazade* in 1888 during his summer break from teaching, roughly the same time that he completed his *Russian Easter Overture*. In the earliest version, Rimsky-Korsakov gave descriptive titles to *Scheherazade's* four sections: *I. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship*, *II. The Tale of Prince Kalendar*, *III. The Young Prince and the Princess*, and *IV. Festival at Bagdad. The Sea. The Ship Goes to Pieces on a Rock. Conclusion*. He was uncomfortable with a strictly programmatic interpretation of his music, however, and so before publishing the work, he considered replacing the titles of the four movements with less picturesque designations: *Prelude*, *Adagio*, *Ballade*, and *Finale*. Rimsky-Korsakov did away with movement titles altogether in the published version of the Suite, but by this time the original descriptive titles were well known. He actually managed to have it both ways, however, as he later wrote in his autobiography:

“In composing *Scheherazade*, I meant these hints to direct but slightly the hearer's fancy on the path which my own fancy had traveled, and to leave more minute and particular conceptions as to the will and mood of each movement. All that I desired was that, if the listener liked my piece as *symphonic music*, he should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an oriental narrative of some varied fairy-tale wonders, and not merely four pieces played one after the other, and composed on the basis of themes common to all of the four movements. Why then, if this is the case, does my suite bear the specific title of *Scheherazade*? Because this name and the title *The Arabian Nights* connote in everybody's mind the East and fairy-tale marvels—besides, certain details of the musical exposition hint at the fact that all of these are various tales of some one person (which happens to be Scheherazade) entertaining therewith her stern husband.”

Rimsky-Korsakov was an acknowledged master of scoring music for orchestra (his *Principles of Orchestration* is still one of the standard works on the subject.) For him, “...orchestration is part of the very soul of the work.” *Scheherazade* may well be his masterwork in this regard, and few other works make such effective use of orchestral color. *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship* begins with a pair of themes that recur in all four movements: an angry theme from the trombones (the voice of the Sultan) and a seductive violin solo, which despite all of Rimsky-Korsakov's circumlocutions, has come to represent Scheherazade herself. The body of the movement is distinctly aquatic, with a broad 6/4 theme that suggests the rolling of the waves.

There are several princes in the collection who disguise themselves as *kalendar*s, or roving holy men. For the second movement, after the violin announces a new story, Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tale of the Kalendar Prince* begins with a series of quiet, Eastern-sounding woodwind solos that expand into a dance for the full string section. A bold pronouncement from the solo trombone suddenly changes the mood, and the movement ends in what sounds like an extended battle scene, alternating Scheherazade's theme with more warlike music. The third movement, *The Young Prince and the Princess*, provides a gentle contrast as a kind of nostalgic interlude,

featuring a rich dance melody (derived from Scheherazade's theme) above a shimmering background and hints of Eastern percussion. Scheherazade herself appears briefly, before the movement ends with a lush coda.

The finale features the boisterous and frantic music of a *Festival at Baghdad*, music that alternates with Scheherazade's sultry provocations. Eventually the broad, sea-faring music of the first movement returns, with Sinbad's theme blazing in the trombones and the woodwinds providing the howling of hurricane winds that culminates in a moment of crashing disaster. The entire work ends with a quiet epilogue for solo violin, as Scheherazade concludes the final tale and thereby miraculously saves her own life.

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